

A Cat Named Mojave 🐱

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A Cat Named Mojave

by [MissTerGoreistic](#)

Summary

I doubt this fic will reach a lot of people, considering the game JUST released on the 8th of December, but I was too inspired by it to NOT write about it. I think it was a devastatingly beautiful work of art. Well.. when you look behind all the blood and gore, (which is basically 90% of the game) its actually really fascinating.

This fanfic doesn't stray from the games lore or story. I'm basically rewriting the ENTIRE game as it is, just with more in depth interactions and dialog. Everything that happens within the game, you will see again here written in explicit detail and extra scenes. I'm just tweaking and extending the story more as we go, making it more horrific and disturbing. If that's event possible.. For example, Mojave looks mostly the same, except hes wearing ONLY cargo pants, bandaged hands, and actually has hind legs like a cat. And YOU, the reader, who I decided to give a gender neutral name (Rowan) which is apparently gender neutral.. are the main character in this story.

I really hope I captured Mojaves character well. All credit to the makers of the game, "Cat Named Mojave," goes to StarGazers Studios!

I hope you enjoy!

Notes

P.S

I DOUBT this fic needs a warning, cause if you're reading this, completely aware of the game itself, then you KNOW what to expect here. But I will warn anyways.

⚠ TW!!! ⚠

Blood, gore, violence, massacre, death, manipulation, etc

- Inspired by [Cat Named Mojave](#) by Stargazers Studio

Chapter 1: Stranded

Rowan knew the car was going to die before it even happened.

The engine had been coughing for an hour, sputtering like a smoker on their fifteenth “I’m quitting this week” attempt, but they kept pushing it anyway because they were an idiot with confidence issues and a dream. A dream called “getting out of this blistering hellscape before the sun cooks my bones through the windshield.”

Of course, the universe said: **LMAO**, absolutely not.

The engine let out one last pathetic wheeze. A metallic *clank*, like something important giving up on life.

Then the whole car lurched, rattled, and rolled to its dusty death on the shoulder of a highway that hadn’t seen civilization since 1997.

“Great,” Rowan muttered, deadpan. Their voice was dry, cracked from the heat. “Fantastic. Love this for me.”

They slapped the steering wheel, which was approximately the temperature of Satan’s stovetop, and winced. Arizona heat didn’t play around. The second they opened the door, a wave of blistering air slapped them in the face like the sun had something against Arizona specifically. Dust puffed up around their boots as they stepped out, tugging their cropped black jacket off one shoulder because even loser goths have heat limits.

The car looked pathetic.. a sad little metal carcass baking under a merciless heat waved sky.

“Okay, sweetheart,” they told the car, flicking a wire aside. “Tell mama what broke.”

Rowan crouched down and popped the hood with a practiced flick of their wrist. They knew cars. They lived in their car half the time. They had trauma and socket wrenches. They were unstoppable... theoretically.

Except this wasn’t a normal breakdown.

When they lifted the hood, a hot gust of steam blasted their face. Rowan leaned back, fanning themselves with their hand.

“Oh perfect,” they groaned. “Yes, steam. Because I wasn’t sweaty enough already.”

Under the hood looked like a mechanical murder scene.

They stared at the engine block.. cracked.

The wiring.. fried.

The battery.. leaking like it had sprung a fatal wound.

The car battery was dead.

Like dead *dead*.

Like “*SHOULD’VE been replaced SIX MONTHS AGO but you procrastinated because LIFE is hard*” dead.

Rowan squinted, grimaced, and pushed a strand of windblown hair out of their face.

Before straightening up and wiping their hands on their jeans, leaving streaks of grease and contempt. “Okay. Fine. Car battery’s toast. That’s easy. I’ll just call Triple A... with my phone... which is—”

They dug into their pocket.

Dead.

The universe didn’t even grant them the courtesy of 2%.

How convenient

Rowan stared at the blank screen, their eyes twitching so hard it felt like a facial seizure.

“Nice. LOVE that for me. Awesome. Great. Hope the desert coyotes like sexy stud-flavored snacks.” They kicked a rock. The rock didn’t deserve it, but Rowan was hot and pissed and dehydrated and allowed to bully inanimate objects.

Rowan stuck their hands on their hips, surveying the endless barren land around them. Nothing but miles of sun-bleached dirt, jagged rock formations, and heat haze making the horizon wobble like the planet itself was exhausted.

Of course there wasn’t a gas station.

Of course there wasn’t a ranger post.

Of course there wasn’t a single car in sight.

“Well, looks like I’m walking,” they sighed, shoving the dead phone into their pocket like it had personally betrayed them. “Because dying out here with some horny buzzard making out with my corpse is not on my bucket list.”

They slung their jacket over their shoulder, immediately regretted that because the sun was burning their skin to crisp, put it back on, and started walking down the road with the enthusiasm of someone marching directly into hell.

Rowan wasn’t panicked. Not *yet*. But the dread was creeping in, slow and quiet, like a shadow stretching across the sand. Because as competent as they were, even they knew when a car was beyond help. The asphalt radiated heat through their boots. Sweat trickled down the back of their neck. Each step felt heavier, slower, like the desert was quietly chewing on their ankles.

Rowan muttered under their breath as they trudged forward, “If I find a gas station, great. If I find a person, great. If I find a serial killer, at least I’ll die.” Their boots scuffed on the rough pavement as they kept moving. The silence was thick and unnatural, like the kind that felt like someone was listening.

The desert didn’t just feel empty.

It felt observant.

Watching.

Waiting.

Rowan swallowed, suddenly aware of how loudly their footsteps echoed in a place that shouldn’t echo at all. Something about the air felt wrong, too still, too warm, like breath on the back of their neck. But hey? That’s Arizona for you!

They kept walking, trying to shake it off.

“You’re fine,” they muttered. “You’re just alone in the middle of nowhere with no phone, no car, and no shade. Totally fine. You’ve lived through worse.”

A tumbleweed skidded across the road behind them like some damn cliché western movie.

Rowan stopped when they heard it.

Not immediately.. their brain tried to file it under normal desert nonsense first. Wind did weird things out here. Coyotes screamed like they were auditioning for a horror podcast. Metal expanded and popped in the heat. The desert loved lying.

But this sound?

This sound was wrong.

A long, guttural, warbling cry rolled over the hills, sharp at the start, wet at the end, like something was choking on its own lungs. It wasn’t a coyote yip. It wasn’t a cow low. It wasn’t mechanical.

It was agony.

Rowan froze mid-step, one boot half-lifted, sweat sliding down their spine. The sound echoed again, closer this time, then cut off abruptly, not fading, not driftin, just stopped, like someone had reached over and shut it up.

They stared out at the desert, squinting against the glare.

“...That’s new,” they said flatly.

Deer didn't live out here. Not like that. Arizona desert wasn't exactly a Bambi-friendly environment. You got cows, sure. Coyotes. Jackrabbits. Snakes that hated you. But deer? Especially ones screaming like they were being actively unmade?

Rowan rolled their shoulders, forcing their muscles to unlock.

"Okay. Cool. Maybe it's... a cow? With stage fright?"

They resumed walking, because standing still in the desert listening to mystery death noises felt like a great way to get heatstroke and murdered. A few minutes later, the asphalt thinned, cracked, then gave up entirely, replaced by a narrow dirt path cutting off into the hills like a secret it didn't want to share.

Rowan slowed.

The path wasn't official. No sign. No marker. Just two faint tire tracks pressed into the sand, half-swallowed by time and wind. It angled away from the road, disappearing between low, jagged hills that looked like broken teeth.

They glanced back at the highway. Endless. Empty. Useless.

Then back at the path.

"Well," Rowan sighed, pinching the bridge of their nose. "This is either a shortcut to civilization or the opening scene of my Dateline episode."

They followed it.

The dirt crunched under their boots, softer than asphalt, sucking at their soles like it wanted to keep them. The air felt thicker here, heavier, the heat pressing down instead of radiating up. The hills blocked the wind entirely, trapping sound and smell and something else Rowan didn't want to think about.

They heard it again.

Closer now.

A ragged, choking cry, unmistakably animal tearing out of something's throat before breaking into a hoarse gurgle. Rowan flinched despite themselves, jaw tightening.

"Jesus," they muttered. "Someone's hunting real aggressively today." That explanation sat better than the alternatives.

Hunters meant people.

People meant help.

Help meant not dying out here like a cautionary tale. The path curved, dipped, then rose again, and that's when Rowan smelled it.

Copper.

Thick.

Warm.

They stopped dead.

The blood trail started subtle , dark stains splattered across pale sand, half-dried at the edges. Then more. Drag marks. Long, uneven grooves carved into the dirt, like something heavy had been pulled against its will.

Rowan stared at it, lips pressing into a thin line.

“...Oh, absolutely not,” they murmured.

They should turn around. Every rational thought screamed that this was a *do not proceed* moment. But the desert had already taken their car, their phone, and their patience. And underneath the dread was something worse..

Hope.

Hope that whoever made this mess was nearby. Hope that they weren't alone. Hope that the blood wasn't human. Rowan swallowed and followed the trail. It led over the rise of the hill, and then the world opened up into something straight out of a nightmare scrapbook.

A house sat in the basin below.

Not a nice one. Not even a trying one. It was small, cracked, and slumped inward on itself like it was embarrassed to exist. Sun-bleached wood, windows dark and uninviting, roof sagging like it had given up decades ago. A shed leaned nearby at an angle that defied physics. Rusted fencing stretched crookedly around the property, some sections collapsed entirely. Discarded junk littered the yard, old tires, broken tools, things Rowan couldn't immediately identify and didn't want to.

Nothing moved.

Then something did.

Near the front of the house, a figure hauled something large across the dirt, straining, dragging it by the legs. The body left a fresh smear of blood behind it, dark and glossy in the sun.

Rowan's stomach dropped.

It was a deer.

Or what was left of one. The body looked... wrong. Too limp. Too mangled. The head lolled at an unnatural angle, antlers scraping the ground with a dull, hollow sound. Blood soaked into its fur in uneven patches, some of it still dripping.

The figure paused, adjusted their grip, then dragged the carcass toward the house with disturbing ease.

Rowan crouched instinctively behind a rock, heart hammering.

Okay. Okay. Breathe.

This is fine.

Hunters exist.

People hunt deer.

People do not usually hunt deer out here, but hey, maybe this one didn't get the memo.

And hunters had cars. Generators. Batteries.

Rowan straightened, brushing dirt off their jeans, forcing their voice to work. "Hello?" they called again, louder now, pitching it casual like that might magically make this situation *normal*. "Uh.. hi. Sorry to bother you. My car died up the road and I just—"

No answer.

The house didn't react. It just sat there, sun-bleached and patient, like it had all the time in the world.

Rowan hesitated, then started toward it anyway. Each step felt deliberate, heavy, like the desert itself was taking notes. Up close, the place smelled worse, like old wood covered in dust and copper, something faintly sweet underneath that made the back of their throat tighten.

The front door was cracked open.

Just enough.

Rowan stopped on the porch, peering at the narrow slit of darkness inside. Warm light leaked out in thin bands, flickering like a bad memory. The air coming from within was... cooler. Not cool, but less hostile than the sun. That alone felt like temptation.

"Hello?" they called again, louder now. "Uh.. I don't mean to trespass or anything. My car broke down up the road and I was wondering if you maybe had—"

They knocked once, half-hearted. The door creaked in response, swinging inward a few inches on its own.

"—a phone," they finished weakly.

No answer.

Of course.

Rowan exhaled slowly.

“Okay. Cool. Haunted house rules. Love that.”

They pushed the door open..

and stepped inside.

Chapter 2: What Are You?

Chapter Summary

Meeting Mojave

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The heat dropped immediately the moment Rowan stepped inside, replaced by a stale, enclosed warmth that clung to their skin. The floorboards creaked under their boots, old wood complaining about being perceived. The lights were dim, amber-toned, flickering just enough to make the shadows crawl when you weren't looking straight at them.

The entryway was narrow. A hallway, boxed in tight, like the house wanted to funnel you forward whether you liked it or not.

A grandfather clock hung crookedly against the wall.

Tick.

Tock.

Tick.

Tock.

Too loud. *Way* too loud.

Rowan glanced at it as they passed, the glass cracked, the pendulum swinging with stubborn consistency, like it was keeping time for something more important than them.

Trash and loose papers littered the floor. Notes, sketches, things scrawled in uneven handwriting. Rowan didn't stop to read them. Their instincts were screaming to not linger.

The hallway turned left.

Rowan followed it and stepped into a small living room that felt... curated. Not clean.. but intentional. A wooden dining table sat crooked in the center, one chair pulled out as if someone had just stood up. The walls were decorated.

Not nicely.

Framed pictures hung at uneven angles, some abstract, some mundane, some deeply unsettling in ways Rowan couldn't immediately articulate. A blurry painting of a dog. And a

horrific upclose painting of a demonic woman's face, or whatever the hell it was.

Hunting trophies were mounted sporadically, antlers, skulls, their empty sockets watching from the walls. The room smelled faintly of old leather and something iron-rich.

Rowan stopped.

Their throat tightened. “Okay,” they murmured, voice thinner now. “So... hunter. Definitely a hunter. That’s... normal. This is normal.” They stepped past the dining table, the wood creaking underfoot like it was warning them with each step. A doorway led deeper into the house, toward the kitchen.

The smell hit them first.

Metallic. Mold. Rotting.

Counters cluttered with trash, stained rags, empty cans. Something dark and soaked had seeped into the wood near the sink, somewhat splattered, messy and absorbed. Like the counter had learned how to drink blood. The lights above flickered erratically, buzzing, dimming, then flaring back to life.

Rowan’s stomach churned. “Hello?” they called again, more cautiously. “I’m really sorry, I thought I saw someone outside. I don’t want any trouble, I just—”

They stopped.

At the far end of the hall beyond the kitchen, something stood.

Not moving.

Just... there.

A silhouette.

Tall. Wrongly shaped. Too still.

Rowan’s heart slammed into their ribs.

“...Hey,” they said, forcing friendliness into their voice like it was duct tape over a crack. “Hi. I— I’m sorry for just walking in like this. My car died and I was hoping maybe you could help me out? Battery’s toast and my phone’s dead and I—”

The figure stepped forward.

Into the light.

Rowan’s words died in their throat.

It wasn’t human.

Not even *close*.

It stood upright, humanoid in shape but unmistakably other. Furred. Orange. Tall ears flicked subtly atop its head. Its arms and hands were wrapped in bandages, layered and frayed, stained darker in places, dark Grey green cargo pants with leather holster straps that looked homemade, and from beneath them curved long, sharp claws that caught the light when it moved. Its tail was... wrong. Shortened. Wrapped tightly in cloth near the base, like something precious had been brutally taken and hastily hidden.

Its eyes locked onto Rowan.

Too *intelligent*.

Rowan's mouth opened.

Nothing came out.

Every survival instinct in their body screamed at once. Run. Fight. Freeze. Vomit. All equally unhelpful.

The creature tilted its head slightly, studying them.

Then it spoke.

"Don't be nervous," it said calmly, voice smooth and unsettlingly conversational. "You had *so* much confidence waltzing into my house like you owned the place. Don't back out now."

It took another step closer.

"Let's talk for a bit.."

Rowan swallowed hard, hands twitching uselessly at their sides. Their brain finally rebooted just enough to form a sentence.

"...Why do you,"

they croaked, then cleared their throat, hating how small they sounded.

"Why do you look.. like that?"

The creature smiled.

It showed teeth.

"Why do I look like this?" it echoed,

amusement curling through its voice. "Hell, I could ask you the same thing... you wander into my house, leave your dirty footprints on my floor."

Its eyes flicked down to Rowan's boots, dusty, unmistakable. Then back up.

"It makes me wonder," it continued softly, "are you lost... or are you stupid?"

The grandfather clock ticked behind them.

Loud.

Patient.

Hungry.

Rowan didn't move.

Couldn't, really.

Every muscle in their body had locked up, fear congealing under their skin like wet cement. The air felt thick, heavy, like it had weight. Their heart was pounding so hard it felt visible. Loud enough that surely.... surely.... this thing could hear it.

The cat creature stood there, looming in the kitchen doorway, posture rigid and unnatural. Shoulders too tense. Head tilted just enough to feel wrong. Those eyes never blinked. Not once.

Rowan's brain was doing that fun thing where it fires off ten thoughts at once and none of them are helpful.

This is how I die.

This is a hallucination.

This is Arizona, of course it is.

I should not have worn combat boots to my own murder.

Silence stretched.

The grandfather clock ticked.

The lights flickered. The thing just watched them. And then, because panic does wild things to a person.. Rowan's mouth betrayed them.

"Are..."

Their voice cracked. They swallowed, tried again.

"Are you... a furry?"

....

The word hit the room like a dropped plate.

The cat's expression didn't change at first.

Just stillness.

Then—

“...*Excuse me?*”

The single word was soft. Flat. Utterly incredulous.

Rowan immediately regretted being alive. “I— I mean—” they stammered, hands lifting in a useless, placating gesture. “No offense. I just— you’re tall, and a cat, and standing upright in what appears to be your murder kitchen, so my brain—”

The cat took *one* slow step forward.

Rowan shut up instantly.

“Did you,” the creature asked, voice low now, “just reduce me to an internet *subculture?*”

Rowan blinked.

“I—listen, I’m under a lot of stress.”

“A furry in mid summer of *Ari-fucking-zona? Really?*”

“Why do you think I was freaked out?! I didn’t know whether *you’d* die first of heatstroke or kill me!

Another step.

“You break into my home,” it continued calmly, “track blood across my floors, stare at my decor like you’re browsing a thrift store, and then—then you look me in the eyes and ask if I’m a *furry?*”

Rowan winced. “When you say it like that—”

“I am not,” the cat snapped, suddenly sharp, ears twitching, “a man in a cheap foam suit getting off on conventions and mutual validation.”

There was a pause.

Then, with a strange almost offended dignity,

“I am a predator.”

Rowan stared at him.

“...Okay,” they said faintly. “That’s... *worse*, actually.”

The cat straightened, clearly regaining composure, smoothing an invisible wrinkle in his bandaged arm like he hadn’t just been spiritually slapped.

He sighed, long and theatrical. “Unbelievable,” he muttered. “I finally get a visitor with enough gall to wander into my domain, and this is what I’m working with.”

He looked Rowan up and down again, eyes sharp, assessing.

“Name’s *Mojave*,” he said casually, like this was a normal introduction and not the most cursed meet-cute in human history. “And you are...?”

Rowan hesitated.

Their survival instincts were screaming again.

“...Rowan.”

Mojave smiled.

Not kindly.

“Well, Rowan,” he said, stepping closer, too close, invading space like it was a sport. “Congratulations. You’re either the bravest thing to crawl out of the desert... or the dumbest.”

He leaned in, eyes gleaming.

“Lucky for you, I haven’t decided which yet.”

Mojave turned away.

Just for a second. Just long enough to rummage through the cluttered kitchen like this was all perfectly normal, stepping around trash, nudging something heavy under the counter with his foot, humming faintly to himself like he hadn’t just shattered Rowan’s understanding of reality.

And that’s when Rowan saw it.

The tail.

Or.. what was left of it at least.

It wasn’t a costume prop. It wasn’t foam. It wasn’t clipped on with Velcro and bad decisions. It was real. Torn clean in half, the remaining stump wrapped tight in stained bandages, the fur around it uneven where it had clearly been *chewed*, not cut. Bone had once been there. Rowan could tell. They knew anatomy well enough to recognize trauma when they saw it.

Their stomach turned.

Then Mojave shifted his weight.

His hind legs bent, wrong in a way that was too right. Digitigrade. Built for spring, for speed. When his pawed feet pressed into the wooden floorboards, there was a soft, almost wet sound

as the pads made contact.

And the claws,

They slid out.

Not dramatically. Not for show.

Just a natural reflex. A faint click-scrape as keratin kissed wood, then retracted again.

Rowan's breath hitched.

No human fake did that. No costume moved like that. No wealthy furry convention on God's green internet had that level of biomechanical accuracy.

Their sarcasm died in their throat. "...Okay," Rowan said quietly. "Yeah. No. That's— that's not a suit."

Mojave paused.

Didn't turn around.

Just froze mid-motion.

Rowan swallowed, throat dry. "What are you?"

Slowly, Mojave straightened. He turned his head just enough for one golden eye to glance back at them, half-lidded, amused. Not threatened. Offended.

"What am I?" he echoed softly, like the question itself was quaint.

He turned fully now, claws clicking once against the floor as he faced them again. Up close, he smelled faintly of iron, dust, and something warm and animal that made Rowan's instincts scream.

He smiled. A thin, knowing thing.

"I'm the only thing in this room that's real," Mojave said. "The rest of you?" His gaze dragged over Rowan slowly, dissecting. "You're all just shapes. Soft, temporary shapes that break easy."

Rowan's jaw tightened. "That didn't answer the question."

Mojave chuckled under his breath. "It did. You just don't like it."

He stepped closer again, looming, his presence filling the space like a pressure change before a storm. "Labels are for people who need permission to exist," he went on. "Human. Animal. Monster. Costume. Those are comfort words. Little boxes so your brain doesn't panic when something doesn't fit."

He leaned down slightly, eyes locking with Rowan's.

“I *don't* fit.”

The grandfather clock ticked loudly behind them.

Mojave tilted his head, studying Rowan like an insect pinned under glass.

“But since you’re curious,” he added lightly, “let’s say I’m what happens when the world bites first.”

A pause.

Then, almost playfully:

“And before you ask—yes. I bite back.”

Rowan swallowed hard. Their brain finally caught up with the fear their body had been screaming about this whole time.

“...I just need a car battery,” they said weakly.

Mojave’s ears twitched.

Oh.

That made him very interested.

Mojave blinked.

Once.

Slowly.

“A... car battery,” he repeated, tilting his head so far to the side it looked uncomfortable, vertebrae creaking faintly. His ears angled forward, curious. Interested. “That’s it? That’s what dragged you into my living room, dripping sweat all over my floors?”

Rowan nodded, already hating themselves. “Yeah. My car died a few miles back. Phone’s dead. No signal. I figured—”

They *stopped*.

Too **late**.

The realization hit like ice water straight down their spine.

They had just told a strange, very much not human predator in the middle of nowhere that they were stranded, alone, untraceable, and stupid enough to wander inside his house uninvited.

Mojave stared at them.

Then..

He laughed.

Not loud. Not manic.

Just a soft, breathy chuckle that curled out of his chest like smoke, growing and growing until it turned into full, open amusement. He leaned back against the counter, one claw tapping against the wood as if he'd just heard the best joke of his life.

"*Ooh*," he said warmly. "Oh, you are *adorable*."

Rowan's shoulders stiffened.

"You know," Mojave continued, strolling closer again, casual as a cat circling prey, "most folks keep that part to themselves. The alone part. The no-phone part. The '*nobody knows where I am and the desert would eat my bones clean in a week*' part."

He leaned in, voice dropping, intimate and cruel.

"People like you?" he went on. "You disappear easy. Heatstroke. Coyotes. A bad fall. Maybe someone finds a boot. Maybe not. World shrugs. Sun keeps shining."

Rowan swallowed. "That's... comforting."

Mojave grinned wider. "I try."

He lifted one clawed hand, gesturing vaguely around the house. "I mean, look at this place. Middle of nowhere. No neighbors. No screams anyone'd hear. I could *slit* you open right here, drain you *slow*, hang you up in the shed, and by tomorrow you'd just be another mystery for people who don't actually care."

Rowan's heart was hammering now, adrenaline flooding their limbs.

Mojave watched it happen. Savored it.

Then, he laughed again.

"Oh, relax," he said, waving a hand dismissively. "If I wanted you dead, you wouldn't be standing."

That... somehow *didn't* help.

He straightened, smoothing nonexistent wrinkles out of his pants, tone turning almost conversational. "No, no. Killing you now would be terribly boring. You just got here."

Rowan exhaled shakily. "So... you're not going to murder me."

"Not today," Mojave said cheerfully.

A beat.

“Probably.”

He shrugged.

Rowan grimaced. “That’s the worst reassurance I’ve ever gotten.”

Mojave’s eyes flicked upward, toward the ceiling. “Funny thing is,” he said casually, “I do have a spare battery. Sitting down in the basement. Been collecting dust.”

Rowan’s head snapped up. “You do?”

“Mhm.” He smiled, slow and sharp. “But see, favors make the world go *‘round*.”

Rowan frowned, already not liking this “What kind of favor?”

Mojave clasped his hands behind his back and rocked on his heels like he was about to ask them to water his plants. “Oh, nothing big,” he said lightly. “Nothing crazy. Just a small, teeny, microscopic little errand.” He dramatically sighed, staring at the ceiling.

Rowan’s gut twisted. “You’re doing the voice people do right before they ask for something horrific.”

Mojave beamed. “You’re quick.”

He leaned closer again, eyes boring into Rowan’s.

“I need you to fetch something for me,” he said. “A little game. A bit of exercise. Consider it... a test.”

“A test of what?” Rowan reluctantly asked.

Mojave’s grin widened, teeth glinting. “Of how far you’re willing to go,” he said softly, “for something you want.”

Rowan hesitated.

Every instinct they had was screaming leave, run, die in the desert if you have to, but the thought of the long walk back of the sun, the heat, the certainty of passing out somewhere between here and nowhere.. made their throat tighten.

“...What kind of favor?” they asked finally, voice tight, controlled. Tired. “Because if this turns into murder, I’m gonna be honest, I’d rather take my chances with heatstroke.”

Mojave’s smile twitched.

He turned away without answering, padding around the kitchen counter with that same unnatural, fluid grace. His shoulders stayed tense, lifted, like a corpse held upright by invisible strings. Every step was deliberate. Quiet. His claws clicked softly against the floorboards, then slid back in as his paw pads pressed down.

He stopped in front of the wall.

Rowan followed his gaze.

Mounted there, between two crooked frames and a rusted horseshoe was a deer's head. At least... they thought it was a deer's head.

The antlers were large, branching, elegant. The fur was matted and dark, dried blood crusted near the base of the neck. The eyes were gone, hollow sockets staring blindly into the room. It was mounted too carefully. Too reverently.

Mojave lifted a claw and tapped the plaque beneath it. "I'm looking to add to my collection," he said, voice almost fond. "I need *three* carcasses. The Cervimorphuses"

Rowan frowned. "Three?"

Mojave turned slowly, his expression sharpening. "Three," he repeated. "Not *two*. Not one and a *half*. Not '*oops I lost count*.' **Three**."

Rowan nodded. "Okay. Three deer. That's... doable, I guess." A pause. "What did you call them? Cervi—what?"

"Cervimorphus," Mojave said smoothly.

Rowan scratched the back of their neck. "Is that like... a subspecies? Some kind of regional deer breed?"

Mojave's ears flicked.

"Sure," he said lightly. "*Something* like that."

That answer should've bothered them more than it did.

"Shotgun's above the TV," Mojave added, already moving.

Rowan turned toward the living room, heart thudding. The TV sat dark and dusty in the corner, an old thing with rabbit-ear antennas bent at odd angles. Sure enough, mounted above it was a shotgun, worn but well-maintained. They reached up and took it down, the weight solid in their hands. Familiar. Almost comforting.

Okay, Rowan told herself. Hunting deer. That's it. People hunt deer. Normal. Gross, but normal.

Behind them,

Mojave stepped close.

Too close.

Rowan felt him before they heard him, a presence at their back like a shadow that breathed. They glanced sideways just in time to see his hands move. Bullets appeared in his palm. Where he'd been hiding them, Rowan had no idea. With practiced ease, Mojave slid them into the shotgun's chamber, his movements quick, precise. His claws retracted as his fingers worked, then extended again when he was done, one claw idly tracing the barrel.

In his other hand,

A knife.

Rowan's held their breath.

They gave him a quick, suspicious side glance, fingers tightening around the shotgun's grip. For half a second, the idea flashed through their mind..

What if I just..

Mojave's head *snapped* toward them.

Instantly.

"No."

He didn't raise his voice. Didn't bare his teeth. He was.. calm.

He just smiled.

"Don't even try," Mojave continued, stepping closer until Rowan could smell the metal on his breath. "By the time you pull that trigger, your neck'll be hanging from your torso and your last thought will be—"

He leaned in, whispering it like a secret.

"—Where did it all go wrong?"

His knife glinted as he pulled back, twirling it once before letting it rest casually at his side.

Rowan swallowed hard and looked away.

"Good choice," Mojave said, satisfied.

He straightened, looming, his posture rigid and predatory. His tail stump twitched beneath the bandages. His ears angled forward, alert. Focused.

"Head out past the hills," he went on. "You'll hear them before you see them. They're... loud."

Rowan shifted the shotgun on their shoulder, trying to ignore the way their hands were shaking.

"And when you're done?" Mojave added, his eyes gleaming. "Bring them back whole."

Rowan forced a breath. "...Just deer," they muttered.

Mojave's grin widened.

"*Just* deer," he echoed.

Mojave watched Rowan shoulder the shotgun, head tilting slightly as if he were assessing livestock. One ear twitched forward while the other lagged behind, torn edge flicking like it had a mind of its own. His pupils narrowed to thin vertical slits despite the dim room, the gold of his eyes catching the light in a way that felt predatory, evaluative.

"Hm," he murmured, tail stump twitching beneath its bandages. "You'll want the wagon."

The word wagon came with a small curl of his lip, like he was amused Rowan hadn't already considered it. His shoulders rolled once, slow and deliberate, joints popping faintly, too fluid, too loose, like a body that didn't quite obey human limits.

Rowan paused at the threshold. "The... wagon."

Mojave gestured with the knife, not pointing so much as carving the air. His wrist bent at an unnatural angle, loose and feline, blade glinting as it passed beneath his chin. Outside, half-buried in dust and weeds, sat the wagon, one wheel newer than the others, wood darkened by stains that had soaked deep into the grain.

"You're not dragging three full carcasses back by hand," Mojave said mildly. His whiskers twitched as he spoke, flaring slightly when he emphasized three. "I don't want you exhausted. Sloppy hands make ugly cuts."

Rowan grimaced. "That's... considerate."

Mojave's mouth pulled into something that wasn't quite a smile. One side lifted higher than the other, exposing just the edge of a sharp canine. His ears angled back briefly, like a cat pretending not to care.

"I have my moments."

He moved again, silent despite his size, closing the distance with a lazy circling step. His feet landed pad-first, claws briefly scraping the floor before retracting. He loomed just off Rowan's shoulder, breath warm, voice dropping as his head dipped closer. "Once you've got them," he continued, eyes never leaving Rowan's reflection in the TV screen, "bring them to the shed. I'll show you how to butcher properly."

He inhaled, slow and deep, as if savoring a scent only he could perceive.

"Waste is a *sin*."

Rowan's stomach churned. "You want me to... butcher them."

"Yes."

The word was clipped. Final.

“And then?”

Mojave straightened, vertebrae clicking softly as he rose to his full height. He pointed lazily toward the side of the house, elbow bent too far back, shoulder rotating in a way that made Rowan’s skin crawl.

“Basement entrance is around back,” he said. “Toss the remains down there when you’re done.”

“*Toss*,” Rowan echoed weakly.

Mojave chuckled. The sound vibrated low in his chest, almost a purr, though it carried no warmth. His tail stump jerked once beneath the wraps, an agitated little twitch.

“Don’t overthink it,” he said, lifting a clawed hand and tapping Rowan lightly on the shoulder. The pressure lingered just a second too long. “They’re dead by then. They don’t mind.”

Rowan stood frozen, staring at the door, at the bleached light pouring in from outside. The desert suddenly felt safer than the thing breathing behind them.

They adjusted their grip on the shotgun.

Just deer.

“...Okay,” Rowan said finally.

Mojave’s ears perked instantly, snapping forward. His posture sharpened, predatory focus locking in like a switch had flipped.

“Good,” he said. His pupils widened, then narrowed again. “I knew you were reasonable.”

Rowan shot him a look. “Don’t get it twisted. I’m desperate, not loyal.”

Mojave smiled, fully this time. Teeth sharp and unerving. His head dipped in something almost like approval.

“Same thing,” he replied softly. “In the end.”

He stepped aside with exaggerated politeness, one arm sweeping out, claws glinting as he bowed just enough to mock the gesture. As Rowan crossed the threshold, Mojave’s gaze followed every step, unblinking.

“Oh—and Rowan?”

They *froze*.

“...Yeah?”

Mojave leaned against the doorframe, shoulders hunched, spine curved like a resting predator. His ears angled forward, eyes gleaming with quiet intensity.

“Make sure it’s clean,” he said. “I like my trophies...

intact.”

Chapter End Notes

"JUSt dEeR" he says.

Chapter 3: The Doe Family

The way Mojave had said trophies made Rowan's skin crawl.

They didn't answer. They stepped into the heat, the door creaking shut behind them with a final, hollow sound. From inside, the grandfather clock ticked.

Outside, the wagon's handle was warm under Rowan's palm as they dragged it free from the dirt. The shotgun weighed heavy against their shoulder now, less like a tool, more like an obligation, a burden.

And somewhere beyond the hills, something screamed. The desert swallowed sound the farther Rowan walked. Their boots crunched over gravel and sun-cracked dirt, the wagon rattling behind them like it was already tired of this plan. The hills Mojave had pointed out rose ahead. Arizona through and through. Dry. Hostile. Empty.

Just deer, Rowan told themselves again, for maybe the twentieth time.

Weird deer, sure. Mojave's a freak. But people hunt deer. This is survivable. Get the battery. Leave.

They crested the first hill.

And stopped.

Because tucked into a shallow dip in the land, protected from the worst of the sun, almost thoughtfully placed was a house.

Not a shack. Not a ruin.

A home.

Whitewashed walls. A small porch. A wind chime made of old spoons clinking softly in the hot breeze. Potted plants clustered near the door, alive ones. Green. Thriving. There was even a hand-painted welcome sign nailed slightly crooked beside the entrance and a tiny garden in front of the house.

Rowan frowned. "...This is not a deer hunting area," they muttered. Their gaze flicked instinctively around, searching for water. A stream. A tank. Anything that explained life out here.

There was none. No river. No well. No visible source of water at all.

And yet, this place looked lived in. Maintained. Loved.

Unease crawled up Rowan's spine.

They took a cautious step closer, shotgun still slung over their shoulder, wagon creaking behind them. The house didn't feel abandoned. It felt... occupied. Like walking too close to someone else's dream.

Then the door opened.

At the exact same time Rowan reached the edge of the yard.

The timing was so perfect it felt scripted.

A figure stepped out onto the porch.

Then another.

Rowan froze.

The first was a woman.

However.. she had a deer's head. soft brown fur, wide dark eyes, gentle curve to her muzzle. Her ears flicked as she stepped into the sunlight, dress fluttering lightly in the breeze. Her body was human, unmistakably so, posture relaxed, hands clasped comfortably in front of her.

Behind her came a man.

Larger. Broader shoulders. Same deer skull structure but heavier, antlers thick and asymmetrical. His clothes were rumpled, stained faintly at the collar.

Rowan's brain short-circuited.

They had already seen impossible today. A cat-man with claws and trophies and a god complex.

But this..

This was.. domestic.

Normal. *Human* even.

The woman noticed Rowan first. Her ears perked up. Her eyes widened with genuine excitement.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, pointing. "Honey—look! A human!"

Rowan's heart dropped straight through their ribcage.

A human?

As if Rowan were the strange one. As if this.. this quiet house, this married deer couple in the middle of the Arizona desert was the norm.

The man squinted at Rowan, unimpressed.

“The hell?” he muttered. His voice was rough, irritated, already halfway to a fight. “Who are you?”

Rowan’s hands moved before their brain did.

The shotgun slid down their shoulder. They lowered it until it hung loose at their side, barrel pointed at the dirt. Then they raised their free hand, palm out, nonthreatening. Open.

Please don’t see me the way he sees me, Rowan begged silently.

Please don’t see what I was sent here to do.

“I—I’m sorry,” Rowan said quickly. “I didn’t mean to trespass. My car broke down. I’m just... passing through.”

The woman’s face softened immediately. “Oh, you poor thing,” she said, stepping closer. “Out here? In this heat?”

The man snorted. “You always do this, Jane,” he muttered. “Just invite strangers in like the world’s not full of creeps.”

Jane shot him a look. “And you always assume the worst, John.”

Rowan stood there, heart pounding, trying not to stare at their faces. Trying not to focus on the antlers. On how alive they looked.

Then the door creaked again.

A third figure emerged.

A teenager.

Tall and lanky, antlers still uneven, fur a lighter shade than his parents’. He bounced down the porch steps with easy energy, eyes bright, smile wide.

“Oh wow,” he said cheerfully, waving. “Hi! We don’t get humans out here much.”

Rowan’s stomach twisted.

A family.

A whole family.

Jane nodded enthusiastically. “Not since.. well. Not in a long time.”

Rowan’s throat closed.

The image slammed into their mind uninvited, Mojave’s mounted heads. His careful words. Three carcasses. Not two. Not one and a half.

Three.

Rowan felt sick.

They forced their shoulders to relax, their expression neutral, their voice steady, performing humanity like it was armor. “I’m Rowan,” they said softly. “I swear, I’m not here to cause trouble.”

Jane smiled warmly.

John crossed his arms.

John Jr. waved again.

Jane crossed the yard before Rowan could think of a polite way to retreat. She moved lightly, hooves—no, feet, human-shaped but wrong in how softly they struck the dirt, barely making a sound. When she reached Rowan, she didn’t stop at conversational distance. She stepped close enough that Rowan could smell her: clean fabric, sun-warmed fur, something faintly herbal.

Then she touched them. Just a light brush of fingers against Rowan’s forearm, almost maternal, almost intimate. Too familiar for a stranger.

Rowan flinched despite themselves.

John stiffened immediately. His shoulders rose, antlers angling forward like weapons finding a target. His jaw clenched, teeth grinding audibly. “Jane,” he warned, low and sharp.

She either didn’t notice or didn’t care.

“My goodness,” Jane said, eyes scanning Rowan’s face with soft concern. Her ears drooped slightly. “You look absolutely parched. When was the last time you drank any water?”

Rowan opened their mouth to answer and realized, terrifyingly, that they didn’t remember. Their tongue felt thick. Their lips cracked when they tried to speak. Their stomach twisted painfully, reminding them it had been empty for far too long. “I—uh,” Rowan swallowed. “It’s been a while.”

Jane gasped, genuinely distressed. Her hand lingered at Rowan’s arm, thumb brushing back and forth as if soothing a skittish animal. “Oh, sweetheart. That won’t do at all.”

John stepped closer, inserting himself half a pace between them. His eyes never left Rowan. “They’re fine,” he said. “They said they were passing through. Passing through.”

Jane turned on him, frowning. “You can’t honestly expect them to walk back out there like that.”

“I can and I do,” John snapped. “We don’t know them.”

Rowan felt like prey standing between two very different predators.

Jane's ears flattened. Her voice sharpened. "And I don't know half the people you bring home drunk, John, but I don't throw them to the desert either."

John's nostrils flared. "That's not the same thing."

"Oh, it absolutely is."

She turned back to Rowan, smile returning as if it had never left. "You'll stay for dinner," she said, not a question. "At least until you've eaten and had some water."

Rowan hesitated. Every instinct screamed danger. Mojave's laughter echoed in their head. People like you. The wagon handle dug into their palm like an anchor to the awful truth waiting down the road. But their knees felt weak. Their vision swam just slightly at the edges. And the word dinner hit something raw and desperate inside them.

"...Okay," Rowan said quietly. "Thank you."

John exhaled through his nose, sharp and displeased. "Jane."

"They're a guest," she said firmly. "End of discussion."

John Jr, who had been watching the exchange with wide, curious eyes, grinned. "Cool! We never have guests. Especially a human!"

John shot him a look. "That's for a reason."

Jane took Rowan's hand then decisively and led them toward the porch. Her grip was warm. Stronger than it looked.

Rowan followed.

Inside, the house was worse.

Cozy in a way that felt invasive. Soft lighting filtered through lace curtains. The air smelled like cooked vegetables and bread. Family photos lined the walls.. John and Jane younger, antlers smaller; John Jr. missing teeth, laughing; holidays Rowan didn't recognize but felt unmistakably real. This wasn't a hideout. This was a life.

Jane guided Rowan into the kitchen, bustling immediately, pulling down a glass and filling it with water from a pitcher beaded with condensation. "Drink," she said, pressing it into Rowan's hands.

Rowan drank like they'd been dying. Water sloshed down their throat, relief so intense it almost hurt. They didn't realize their hands were shaking until Jane's fingers closed over them again, steadying the glass. "Careful," she murmured, smiling. Her touch lingered, hand over hand, thumb brushing the back of Rowan's knuckles. Too long. Too gentle.

Rowan nodded awkwardly. "Sorry."

“Oh, don’t apologize,” Jane said. “You can help me with dinner if you’d like.” She guided Rowan toward the counter, standing close, very close. Every time Rowan reached for a utensil, Jane brushed past them. Her hand found their shoulder when she laughed. Her fingers adjusted Rowan’s grip on a knife they didn’t need help holding.

Rowan tried to step away subtly. Jane filled the space immediately. From the doorway, John watched in silence. His eyes were dark. Unblinking. One hand curled tightly around the doorframe, wood creaking faintly under the pressure. Rowan focused on chopping vegetables, on the sound of the knife, on not thinking about wagons and sheds and basements. Because for the first time since the car died, the thought crept in, quiet and horrifying:

If I leave here... someone else will die.

The kitchen grew tighter by the minute.

Jane hovered.

Every movement Rowan made, she mirrored, leaning in to smell the herbs, brushing flour from Rowan’s sleeve that wasn’t there, laughing a little too brightly at things Rowan hadn’t meant as jokes. Her tail flicked behind her in soft, pleased arcs, the white underside flashing every time she smiled at them. Her ears stayed trained on Rowan, swiveling minutely with each sound they made, like they were the most interesting thing in the room.

John noticed.

But then again, it was hard not to notice how handsy she was being.

He stood rigid near the counter, pretending to inspect a cabinet that didn’t need inspecting. His antlers scraped faintly against the hanging light when he shifted. Every time Jane touched Rowan, John’s jaw tightened, lips pulling back just enough to show the edge of his teeth. His tail didn’t move at all, held stiff and low, like a warning flag.

John Jr, meanwhile, leaned against the table, completely unbothered, watching Rowan with open fascination. His ears twitched lazily, one flicking at a fly, the other angled toward Rowan as if trying to catch every word.

“So,” he said cheerfully, “are all humans like you?”

Rowan paused mid-chop. “Uh... define ‘like me.’”

John Jr. tilted his head, antlers still velvet-soft, not fully grown yet. “You don’t have horns. Or a tail. Or fur. But you smell... normal.”

Jane laughed. “That’s because they’re human, sweetheart.”

“Right,” John Jr. said, nodding seriously. “But like... do humans shed?”

Rowan blinked. “Sometimes. Emotionally.”

John Jr. beamed. “Cool.”

John snorted despite himself, then caught Jane’s look and scowled.

Dinner passed in a blur of strained politeness.

Jane insisted Rowan sit next to her. John sat across from them, eyes never leaving Rowan’s hands, tracking every bite they took. John Jr. chattered nonstop, asking questions about human cities, human cars, human music, completely oblivious to the invisible lines tightening around the table.

When the plates were cleared, Jane clasped her hands together, eyes bright. “You know,” she said lightly, “it’s awfully late. And the desert gets dangerous at night.”

Rowan’s stomach dropped.

Jane continued, undeterred. “You should stay. Just for the night.”

John’s chair scraped loudly as he stood. “Absolutely not.”

Jane’s ears flattened. “Excuse me?”

“We do not invite strangers to stay the night,” John snapped. His antlers angled forward again, casting long shadows on the wall. “Especially ones who show up armed.”

Rowan stiffened. “I can leave—”

“No,” Jane said sharply, cutting them off. She turned to John, eyes flashing. “You will not send them back out there.”

“This is our home, Jane!”

“And they are a guest.”

“They are a problem.”

The air went electric.

Jane exhale slowly, then smiled, too calm, too forced. “Why don’t you and John Jr. go fetch some vegetables from the garden,” she said, turning to Rowan. “Give us a moment.”

Rowan hesitated, then nodded. “Yeah. Sure.”

John Jr. hopped up immediately. “I’ll show you! The tomatoes are almost ready.”

Rowan followed him outside, the door shutting behind them with a soft but final click. The garden was neat, orderly, rows of vegetables improbably green against the harsh desert backdrop. John Jr. knelt, tugging gently at a vine, his tail swishing happily behind him.

“So,” he said casually, “how long have you been human?”

Rowan snorted before they could stop themselves. “Uh. All my life.”

John Jr.’s ears perked. “Wow. That’s... a long time.” He glanced up at Rowan, eyes wide and sincere. “Do humans really hunt deer?”

Rowan’s breath caught.

“I—” They forced a smile. “Some do.”

John Jr. nodded thoughtfully, plucking a tomato. “Dad says there are bad ones out there. But you seem nice.”

Rowan looked down at the small basket in their hands, at the vegetables that felt suddenly, painfully ordinary.

“Thanks..” they said quietly.

From inside the house, raised voices filtered through the walls, Jane’s sharp, John’s low and furious.

Rowan’s chest tightened. Because somewhere down the road, Mojave was waiting. And Rowan had no idea which nightmare they were about to choose.

Jane’s voice cut through the desert air like a bell.

“Rowan? John Jr.? We’re ready.”

John Jr. perked up immediately, scooping the vegetables into the basket and trotting toward the house, hooves thudding softly against the packed dirt. Rowan followed more slowly, their stomach knotting tighter with every step. Inside, the house felt warmer now, too warm. The lights glowed low and amber, casting soft shadows that clung to the corners. Jane stood by the table, posture relaxed, tail swaying in slow, satisfied arcs. Her ears were upright again, alert but pleased.

John, on the other hand, was coiled like a spring.

His shoulders were squared, antlers angled forward, blocking half the hallway as Rowan stepped in. His nostrils flared as he took a deliberate step closer, close enough that Rowan could smell the sharp bite of alcohol on his breath mixed with something earthy and animal.

“You’re staying,” John said flatly. Not a question.

Rowan swallowed. “Yeah. Just for the night.”

John’s eyes flicked to the shotgun slung awkwardly over Rowan’s shoulder.

“Then that stays by the door.”

He reached out and hooked a finger under the barrel, claws clicking faintly against the metal as he tugged it down. The movement was controlled but aggressive, his tail giving a short,

irritated lash behind him.

Rowan didn't resist.

They eased the strap off their shoulder and leaned the shotgun carefully against the wall near the front door, hands open, palms visible. "That's fine," Rowan said quickly. "*I'm* not.. here to hurt anyone."

John held their gaze for a long moment. His ears twitched backward, then forward again, like he was listening for something only he could hear. Finally, he stepped aside, though not without brushing past Rowan deliberately, shoulder bumping theirs in a clear warning.

Jane clapped her hands together softly. "See? Civilized." She smiled at Rowan, stepping closer again, too close, adjusting the collar of their jacket with a gentle touch. Her fingers lingered just a second too long. "You must be exhausted," she said. "We'll set you up in the spare room."

Rowan nodded, forcing a smile. Relief and discomfort tangled painfully in their chest. Staying meant water. Food. Shelter.

Staying also meant time. Time for Mojave to wonder where they were. Time for something to go horribly wrong.

John Jr. peeked around the corner, tail wagging. "You can sleep near my room! It's quieter there."

John shot him a look. "Go brush your teeth."

John Jr. groaned dramatically and disappeared down the hall, hooves clopping.

Jane gestured for Rowan to follow. As they moved deeper into the house, Rowan glanced back once at the front door.

At the shotgun, standing useless and silent against the wall. And for the first time since leaving their car, Rowan wasn't sure which side of that door was more dangerous. Rowan sat on the edge of the guest bed with their elbows on their knees and their face buried in their hands, fingers dug hard into their scalp like they could physically squeeze a solution out of their skull.

"Okay," they whispered to themselves. "Okay. Think."

The room was small but clean. A quilt folded too neatly. A dresser with family photos turned face-down, like someone didn't want to look at themselves anymore. The air smelled faintly of soap and hay and something coppery Rowan didn't want to identify.

They dragged their hands down their face.

This was bad. This was *so bad*.

Mojave wanted three carcasses. Not animals. Not “*oops, nature is cruel.*” A **family**. With a kid who waved at strangers. Rowan pressed their palms into their eyes until sparks burst behind their lids. Their brain raced, run, lie, steal the battery, warn them, fight Mojave, shoot Mojave, die horribly, get skinned—

Tap.

Tap.

Scrrrk.

Rowan froze.

The sound came from the window.

Slow. Deliberate. Like claws testing glass. Rowan lifted their head just as a shadow slid across the curtain.

A shape perched outside.

"WHATTHEFUCK—" Rowan screamed.

Not a cool scream. Not a horror-movie scream. A full, high-pitched, panicked, absolutely humiliating squeal that ripped out of them before dignity could intervene. They stumbled backward, heart detonating in their chest, and yanked the curtain aside.

Mojave was sitting on the windowsill.

Perched.

Balanced on the balls of his feet like a cat on a fence, knees bent too sharply, spine curved in an easy, unnatural arc. His hands rested loosely on his thighs, claws flexing in and out of the wood with soft ticks. His torn tail hung behind him, twitching like it had opinions. Warm porch light caught his eyes. They reflected.

Rowan slapped a hand over their mouth. “WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING?!”

Mojave tilted his head, ears swiveling forward with lazy interest. A grin split his face, too wide, too knowing.

“Wow,” he said lightly. “You’d think I dropped in uninvited or something.”

Rowan staggered forward and shoved the window open. “You— you can’t just— you’re outside a bedroom window like a cryptid—”

“I am a cryptid,” Mojave replied pleasantly. “You wound me.”

Rowan lowered their voice, panic sizzling under their skin. “Why are you here.”

Mojave leaned forward, forearms resting on the sill, claws scraping softly as his shoulders rolled. “I came to see what’s taking so long.” His nose twitched. He sniffed the air once, slow and indulgent. “Smells cozy in there,” he added. “You getting cold feet?”

Rowan laughed once, sharp and hysterical. “Cold feet? Mojave, this was NOT part of the deal.”

Mojave’s smile didn’t fade, but something behind it sharpened.

“Yes,” he said calmly. “It was.”

“No,” Rowan snapped. “You made me think I was hunting actual deer. Like— four legs, no opinions, no dinner table conversations. You didn’t tell me what a Cervimorphus was.”

Mojave blinked. Then repeated softly, mockingly, “*What it was.*”

Rowan’s hands trembled. “It’s a family. They have a house. They have a KID. I can’t just— I can’t butcher an entire family!”

Mojave straightened slowly.

When he moved, it wasn’t human. His spine uncoiled vertebra by vertebra, shoulders rising last, head settling into place like it didn’t belong there naturally. His ears flicked back, then forward again.

“Ah,” he said. “There it is.”

Rowan swallowed hard.

Mojave hopped down from the sill soundlessly and stepped closer to the window, looming now. “Tell me something,” he said, voice low and smooth. “Do you think a lion is *evil*?”

Rowan didn’t answer.

“Do you curse the wolf when it pulls down an elk?” Mojave continued, eyes never leaving theirs. “Do you weep for the rabbit when the hawk eats it alive?”

“That’s different,” Rowan said weakly.

Mojave’s grin widened, teeth flashing. “Is it?”

He leaned in, one claw tapping the window frame. *Tap. Tap.*

“You were perfectly fine with this arrangement an hour ago,” he said softly. “You nodded. You agreed. You even held the gun so nicely.”

Rowan’s voice cracked. “Because I didn’t know they could talk.”

Mojave’s ears twitched. “Ah. So that’s the line.”

He tilted his head, studying them like a puzzle. “If they screamed instead of spoke, would that make it easier? If they didn’t have names? If they didn’t smile at you and invite you to dinner?”

Rowan looked away.

“That’s what I thought,” Mojave said, almost fondly. “You’re not moral. You’re just familiar.”

He straightened, his tail bone twitching slightly. “You’ve wrapped yourself so tight in human rules you forgot what survival actually looks like. Predators eat. That’s not cruelty. That’s honesty.”

Rowan’s jaw clenched. Guilt burned hot and ugly in their chest.

Mojave’s voice dropped.

“If you don’t do it,” he said quietly, “*I* will.”

Rowan snapped their head back up. “Don’t.”

“And I won’t be gentle,” Mojave continued, eyes dark, unblinking. “I won’t pretend. I won’t make it quick. The kid especially.. young meat panics the most.”

Rowan’s breath hitched.

Mojave leaned closer, his face filling the window now, breath fogging the glass. “You, on the other hand, have the luxury of mercy. A clean shot. One breath. *One* pull.”

His claws flexed slowly.

“Remember our deal,” he said. “Battery. Freedom. Life.”

Rowan’s shoulders slumped. They looked small suddenly. Tired. Trapped.

Mojave smiled, satisfied.

“I’ll check back soon,” he murmured. “Don’t keep me waiting.”

And with that, he slipped back into the dark, silent as a hunting cat, leaving Rowan alone with the window open, their heart pounding, and the unbearable weight of choosing who deserved to survive.

Chapter 4: "You like my wife?"

Chapter Summary

A series of unfortunate coincidental convenient bullshittery 🌵

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Rowan woke up to the smell of food.

That alone felt wrong.

For half a second, they forgot where they were, forgot the desert, the shotgun, the window, the thing with claws and teeth and a smile that promised follow-through. Their body relaxed into the mattress, mind hazy and sluggish, until the ceiling came back into focus. Wooden. Cracked. A faint water stain shaped like a lopsided heart.

Reality dropped on them like a guillotine.

“Fuck,” Rowan muttered, rubbing their face.

They sat up slowly, every muscle tight, like the house itself might be listening. Sunlight leaked through the thin curtains, painting the room in soft gold. Outside, birds chirped. Normal birds. Cruel, cheerful birds.

Rowan dragged on their jacket and stepped into the hallway.

The grandfather clock ticked.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

It triggered Rowan, almost made them think they were back at Mojaves place. Each step toward the kitchen felt like walking into a firing squad. The kitchen was warm, morning light spilled across the counters, catching on dried stains Rowan pretended not to see. Jane stood at the stove, humming softly, her deer ears flicking in time with the tune. She wore an apron dusted with flour, hooves tapping gently against the tile as she moved.

“Good morning!” Jane chimed the moment she saw Rowan. Her eyes lit up, pupils wide and soft. “Did you sleep alright, dear?”

Rowan hesitated. “Uh. Yeah. I mean.. as well as one can while... stranded in the desert.”

Jane laughed, light and musical. “Oh, I’m so glad! You must be starving. Sit, sit!”

John was already at the table. Arms crossed. Shoulders rigid. Antlers casting long shadows against the wall. He didn’t smile. Didn’t nod. Just watched Rowan with flat, assessing eyes, jaw working like he was grinding something bitter between his teeth. A half-empty coffee mug sat near his hand, the smell sharp and burnt.

John Jr sat beside him, legs swinging, tail flicking happily against the chair. He grinned when he saw Rowan. “Morning!” he said brightly. “Mom says humans eat eggs. Is that true?”

Rowan blinked. “I.. yeah. Some of us. Depends on the human.”

John snorted. “Yeah. And some of them eat *Venison* too.”

Jane shot him a look. “John.”

“What?” he snapped. “I’m just saying.”

Rowan slid into the chair Jane pulled out for them, hyper-aware of their hands, their breathing, the way John’s gaze followed every movement like a scope. The table creaked softly under their weight.

Plates were set down. Eggs. Bread. Something that smelled like herbs and oil. Normal. Too domestic.

Jane placed a plate in front of Rowan, her fingers brushing their wrist, lingering just a beat too long. Her fur was warm. “You look drained,” she said softly, concern genuine. “Still not used to the heat?”

Rowan forced a smile. “You could say that.”

John’s antlers tilted forward slightly. A warning.

Jane ignored it.

“So,” she continued cheerfully, “what brings a human all the way out here? We don’t get visitors. Ever.”

Rowan’s stomach twisted. “Car trouble,” they said. “Bad battery.”

John’s ears flicked. “Convenient.”

Jane elbowed him. “Stop it.”

“I’m just saying,” he muttered, taking a sharp sip of coffee. “No one just ends up out here.”

John Jr leaned forward, eyes sparkling. “Have you ever been to a city? I’ve always wanted to see one. Mom says it’s loud.”

Rowan swallowed a bite of food that suddenly tasted like sawdust. “Yeah. Loud’s... one word for it.” As they ate, their mind raced. Run? Mojave would catch them. Lie? He’d know. Warn them? And then what? Watch him slaughter them anyway?

Rowan glanced at Jane, so kind, so open.. and then at John Jr, humming under his breath, blissfully unaware that his life was already measured out in someone else’s numbers.

Three.

Their hands tightened around the fork.

John noticed.

His eyes narrowed. “You planning on sticking around long?”

Rowan looked up slowly. “Just until I get my car working.”

A beat.

John leaned forward, voice low. “Then you should hurry.”

Jane’s ears drooped. “John—”

“I don’t like this,” he said flatly. “I don’t like strangers. Especially armed ones.”

Rowan’s eyes narrowed, more from exhaustion than irritation. “....The shotgun’s still by the door.”

"And the owner of it is still sitting at the dinner table.." John shot back quickly, glaring at Rowan.

Rowan just went silent.

It was quiet for a moment, the air thick with tension, until wholesome, obvious, John Jr with the brain of a golden retriever puppy broke the tension,

John Jr beamed. “Dad says humans are dangerous, but I think you’re nice.”

Rowan’s chest ached. They smiled back, weak. “Yeah. I get that a lot.”

Outside, the wind shifted. Rowan felt it then, that.. pressure again. That sense of being watched. Of time slipping. Mojave hadn’t said when he’d check back.

Just soon.

And as Jane poured more coffee and John glared and John Jr talked about garden chores, Rowan realized something with sickening clarity,

There was no clean way out of this.

Only choices.

And every single one of them was going to leave blood behind.

Rowan poked at their eggs, buying time, then glanced up with what they hoped passed for casual curiosity. “So... uh,” they said, gesturing vaguely around the room, the house, the middle of absolutely nowhere. “What made you guys settle out here? I mean.. no offense.. but this is... very *desert*.”

Jane laughed softly, the sound warm and practiced. Her tail flicked behind her as she wiped her hands on her apron. “Oh, we love the peace,” she said brightly. “The quiet. No crowds, no noise. Just us. It’s simpler out here.”

John’s jaw tightened.

Jane kept going, oblivious or pretending to be. “And, well... it was what we could afford after John lost his job.”

Silence dropped like a plate shattering.

John slowly set his mug down.

Clink.

His ears pinned back, antlers angling forward as he turned his head toward her. “Jane.”

She blinked. “What?”

“You really gotta tell strangers my business over breakfast?” His voice was tight, bitter. “You always do this.”

Rowan froze, fork halfway to their mouth.

Jane frowned. “I was just explaining—”

“Explain the real reason,” John snapped, eyes flicking to Rowan. “Go on. Since we’re being honest now.”

John Jr looked up, confused. “Dad?”

Jane’s smile faltered. Her ears drooped a fraction. “John, not in front of—”

“Oh, no, please,” John cut in, laugh sharp and humorless. “Let’s air it *all* out. We’re already living in exile, might as well give the tourist the brochure.”

Rowan wished *deeply*.. that the floor would open up and swallow them whole.

John leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms, gaze locked on Rowan like a challenge.

“We’re out here because my wife couldn’t keep her hooves to herself,” he said flatly.

“Because she had an affair.”

Jane sucked in a sharp breath. “That is not—”

“And I knocked the guy,” John continued, voice rising. “Put him in the ground. Ruined everything. So yeah, *Rowan*.. that’s why we live in the ass-end of the desert.”

John Jr stared between them, wide-eyed. “What does that mean?”

Jane rushed to him, placing her hands on his shoulders. “Sweetheart, go.. go check on the garden, okay? See if the tomatoes are ready.”

“But—”

“Please.”

John Jr hesitated, then slid off his chair, ears drooping as he shuffled outside. The door closed. The house felt smaller.

Jane rounded on John. “You did not need to say that.”

“And you didn’t need to paint me like some useless drunk who just ‘*lost his job*,’” he shot back. “You don’t get to rewrite it.”

Rowan sat there, posture stiff, eyes fixed on their plate like it contained the secrets of the universe.

“Uh,” they said weakly. “I can— I can go if—”

“No,” Jane said immediately, turning to them, voice soft again like a switch had flipped. “You’re our guest.”

John scoffed. “For now.”

Jane shot him a glare, then looked back at Rowan, eyes glossy but determined. “I’m sorry you had to hear that. We’ve had... difficulties.”

Rowan nodded slowly, throat tight. “Yeah. I, uh.. get it. Family stuff.”

John studied Rowan for a long moment, something dark and assessing behind his eyes. “You ever notice,” he said quietly, “how strangers always show up right when things are already going to hell?”

Rowan forced a laugh that sounded wrong even to their own ears. “Funny how that works.”

But inside, their stomach twisted.

Because John wasn’t wrong.

And somewhere beyond the hills, Mojave was probably smiling.

After breakfast.

John didn't *offer* to help.

Jane cornered him by the sink, voice low but sharp, hands braced on the counter like she was holding the marriage together by her fingernails. Rowan didn't hear everything.. just fragments. "*They're stranded.*"... "*It's the decent thing.*" ... "*You want them gone, don't you?*"

That last one did it.

John exhaled hard through his nose, antlers tilting as his shoulders slumped in defeat. He shot Rowan a look that could curdle milk.

"Fine," he grunted. "I'll take a look at your car."

Rowan blinked. "Really?"

"Don't get excited," John said, already grabbing his jacket. "If it's fixable, I'll tell you. If it's not, that's not my problem. Either way, you're not staying another night."

Fair.

Jane smiled, too relieved. "Thank you, honey."

John didn't look at her.

Rowan grabbed their boots and followed him outside, heart hammering. As soon as they were away from the house, the silence between them thickened.. dense, heavy, prickly. The desert stretched out around them, sun already climbing, baking the dirt and scrub into something sharp and blinding.

They walked single file through low brush and cracked earth. John moved with the solid, grounded weight of an animal built to charge, hooves crunching against stone. His antlers scraped lightly against overhanging branches now and then, producing a dry *tick tick* that made Rowan's skin crawl. Like they couldn't stop getting mild ptsd from the sound of Mojaves grandfather clock.

Rowan kept their hands visible. No sudden movements. No jokes. No sarcasm. This was not the time.

John walked ahead, long strides, shoulders tense. His tail flicked in short, irritated snaps. Rowan followed a few steps behind, very aware of the fact that they were alone with a six-foot-tall buck built like he punched walls for stress relief.

Neither spoke.

The silence pressed in.

Then John *stopped*.

Abruptly.

So did Rowan, immediately. Instinct.

John turned slowly, eyes sharp, pupils blown wide in the harsh sun. His ears twitched once.

“You like my wife?” he asked.

The words landed heavy.

Rowan felt sweat bead along their spine, and not just from the heat. They kicked a rock weakly, watching it tumble into the brush. “Uh. She’s... nice. She made me food. Let me stay the night when she really didn’t have to.” A pause. “I like her.”

John took a step closer.

“No,” he said quietly. “You *know* what I mean.”

Another step.

Rowan swallowed. “I— yeah. I understand.”

John’s nostrils flared. His antlers dipped forward as he closed the distance completely and grabbed Rowan by the front of their jacket, fist tight in the fabric. Rowan sucked in a breath as they were yanked closer, boots skidding in the dirt.

“You even think about touching her,” John growled, breath hot and sour with old bitterness, “I’ll strap you to a cactus and let the vultures pick you clean. Same way I did the last guy who thought he could have what was mine.”

Rowan’s heart slammed against their ribs.

“I don’t!” they blurted. “I swear— it’s not like that. She’s— she’s a deer!”

John’s eyes narrowed. “Doe.”

“Yeah, yeah— doe, deer, whatever,” Rowan rushed, words tripping over each other. “I don’t—I don’t do interspecies. At all. That’s not—I wouldn’t sleep with either. I promise.”

There was a long, awful moment where John just stared at them, breath heavy, grip iron-tight.

Then, slowly, he let go.

Rowan staggered back half a step, jacket wrinkled, pulse roaring in their ears.

“Keep walking,” John said flatly. “Show me the car.”

Rowan didn’t argue.

They walked faster this time.

The car sat exactly where Rowan left it, a sad, overheated corpse baking under the sun.

John circled it once, hooves clicking softly on asphalt, then popped the hood with practiced ease. He leaned in, antlers nearly brushing the metal, eyes scanning, hands moving with familiarity as he prodded wires and connections.

Rowan hovered a few steps back, watching his expression shift as he took it all in.

John prodded the battery with two fingers. It didn't respond. He frowned, sniffed the air, then leaned closer.

"...Yeah," he said slowly. "That thing's cooked." He tugged on a cable, brittle. Cracked. He straightened, wiped his hands on his jeans, and shook his head. "Battery's fried. Wiring's shot. You could pray to whatever god humans pray to, and it still wouldn't turn over."

Rowan's chest sank. "So... jump-starting it won't—"

"No." John cut them off flatly. "Not unless you've got a miracle tucked in the glove compartment."

Rowan stared at the engine, heat shimmering off the metal. They already knew the answer, but hearing it out loud felt like a nail in the coffin.

"So it's... done."

John nodded once. "Done until you get a new battery. And even then—" he shrugged "might not last long. She's on borrowed time."

Rowan laughed weakly. "Figures."

John stepped back, studying Rowan now instead of the car. His eyes were sharp, searching, like he was trying to decide something important.

"You didn't lie," he said finally. "About being stuck."

Rowan met his gaze. "No."

Another pause.

Rowan stared at the engine bay, heat shimmering off the metal.

A new battery.

Their chest tightened.

They already *knew* who had one.

John shut the hood with a firm clack and looked at Rowan again, expression unreadable.

"You'll need help," he said. "And out here?"

He shrugged.

“Help comes at a price.”

Somewhere far away, like a phantom itch between Rowan’s shoulder blades, they could feel Mojave watching.

Trust me, Rowan thought.

“I *know*.” They said aloud.

They walked back in the late-morning heat, the house appearing again between the scrub like something quietly pretending to be normal.

Jane was waiting on the porch.

She straightened the moment she saw them, ears perking, hands clasped together in that hopeful way that already told Rowan she was bracing for bad news. “Well?” she asked, eyes flicking between John and Rowan.

John stepped past Rowan and up the porch steps. “Battery’s fried,” he said bluntly. “Dead dead. Car’s not going anywhere without a new one.”

Jane’s ears drooped. “Oh...”

Rowan shifted their weight, guilt curling tight in their chest. “I’m sorry,” they said quickly. “I didn’t mean to waste your time. I’ll—I’ll figure something out. I won’t stay long, I promise.”

Jane turned on them immediately, expression softening. She reached out and touched Rowan’s arm again, too gentle. “Oh no, don’t say that. You’re not a bother. Anyone would break down out here.” She smiled, tail giving a reassuring flick. “You can stay until you sort something out.”

John’s head snapped toward her.

“No.”

Jane frowned. “John—”

“No,” he repeated, firmer this time. His antlers tilted forward slightly as he squared his shoulders. “They don’t need to stay.”

Rowan felt their spine stiffen. “It’s really okay,” they said, forcing politeness through the tension. “I’ll be out of your hair soon.”

John exhaled sharply through his nose, then jerked his head toward the desert beyond the fence. “There’s a junkyard about a mile or two out. Old metal dump. If you’re real lucky, you might find a battery that still works.”

Jane looked uncertain. “That place is a mess...”

John shrugged. "Better than hanging around here."

Rowan winced. "What are the odds?"

John snorted. "Like finding a needle in a haystack. Except the haystack bites."

Jane hesitated, then offered, "You could also ask around. Some locals might help."

John shot her a look. "That's a bad idea."

Rowan blinked. "Why?" Even though they already knew first HAND why.

John's ears flattened. He leaned against the porch railing, arms crossing over his chest as his tail flicked irritably behind him. "Animals around here ain't right," he said. "Lunatics. Whole desert's crawling with 'em."

Jane's expression darkened slightly, hands tightening in her apron. "John..."

"It's true," he continued, eyes locking onto Rowan. "Someone's been hunting my kind. Deer. Families. Folks just disappear."

Rowan's throat went dry.

John's jaw clenched, muscles in his neck shifting beneath his fur. "My cousin went missing two weeks back. Left to check his traps. Never came home."

Jane lowered her head, ears drooping fully now.

Rowan swallowed hard, every nerve screaming as a familiar image surfaced in their mind,

A shed.

Hooks.

A wall of trophies.

They *knew*.

They knew *exactly* who.

But they said nothing.

John watched Rowan closely, eyes narrowing as if he sensed something flicker behind their face. "So yeah," he finished, voice low. "I wouldn't go asking favors out there. Desert's got teeth."

Jane reached for Rowan's hand, squeezing it gently. "We'll help however we can," she said, voice earnest. "You're safe here."

Rowan forced a smile that felt brittle.

“Thanks,” they said quietly.

Behind their ribs, dread coiled tighter.

Because safety was a lie.

And the desert was already deciding how much it wanted from them.

Rowan didn’t announce their decision.

They just stood, grabbed the shotgun from where it leaned by the door, and slung it over their shoulder with the quiet resignation of someone choosing the lesser evil and still hating themselves for it. “I’m gonna check the junkyard,” they said, already halfway out the door.

Jane looked relieved and worried all at once. “Please be careful,” she said, ears tilting back. “The heat alone—”

“I’ll manage,” Rowan replied, forcing a thin smile. “I’ve made worse choices.”

John grunted, clearly satisfied that this solution involved Rowan leaving. “Head west. You’ll smell it before you see it.”

That... did not help.

The junkyard was exactly as advertised.

A rotting sprawl of rusted metal and sun-bleached carcasses, half-swallowed by sand and scrub, like the desert itself was slowly eating the evidence. Twisted car frames lay stacked like bones. Tires slumped in heaps. Broken appliances. Bent rebar. Shards of glass that caught the sun and flared like malicious little stars.

Rowan stood at the edge of it, hands on their hips, sweat already dripping down their spine.

“Okay,” they muttered. “Cool. Awesome. Love a scavenger hunt with heatstroke DLC.”

They climbed in.

For hours.

Hours of crawling over jagged metal, ducking under hoods, prying open trunks that fought back like they wanted to bite. Rowan moved like a raccoon in a dumpster, greasy, desperate, muttering curses at inanimate objects that had outlived their usefulness and still refused to help.

Every battery they found was cracked. Corroded. Empty. Dead as a doornail.

Their hands were black with grime. Their arms ached. Sweat soaked through their clothes, clinging uncomfortably. The shotgun banged uselessly against their back with every bend and crawl, a constant reminder of the other option waiting patiently for them.

Mojave's option.

"Nope," Rowan panted, yanking a battery free only to watch acid drip uselessly from its split casing. "Not doing it. Not killing a family. Not today. Not *ever*."

The sun climbed higher.

Then higher.

Then cruel.

Rowan sat back on their heels at one point, chest heaving, head tipped back toward the blinding sky. Their vision swam. The heat pressed down like a hand on the back of their neck.

They laughed once, short, sharp, a little hysterical.

"All this," they said aloud to no one, gesturing weakly at the junkyard, "because I didn't replace a battery on time."

They kept going.

Because the alternative had antlers. And names. And a kid who waved.

They rummaged until their fingers were numb, until their knees were scraped raw, until hope thinned into stubborn, angry refusal. They prayed to no god in particular. Bargained with the universe. Promised to never procrastinate again if it would just give them this one thing.

By late afternoon, Rowan stood in the middle of the junkyard, empty-handed, shaking, and furious.

There was no battery.

Or if there was, it didn't want to be found.

They wiped their face with the back of their hand, smearing grease across their cheek, and felt something cold settle in their gut.

Because the hard way hadn't worked.

And the desert was running out of patience. Rowan's luck, apparently, had decided to take the day off. *Permanently*.

They were elbow-deep in the engine bay of a sunken sedan, already irritated, already dehydrated.. when they felt it.

A sharp scrabbling sound.

Then pain.

“—OW—WHAT THE FU—”

A raccoon launched itself out of the car like a possessed trash goblin, teeth snapping, eyes wild and way too intelligent for comfort. This was not a cute woodland creature. This was a carnivorous, heat-mad demon wrapped in greasy fur.

The raccoon screamed

Like.. screamed screamed. A demonic banshee in fur.

Rowan yelped, stumbling backward, hands flailing as the thing latched onto their sleeve and then, because the universe hates them, *their hand*.

YOU ARE NOT EVEN FROM THIS BIOME—”

They shook their arm like someone trying to fling off a flaming towel, shotgun clattering uselessly against their back, finally sending the creature flying into a pile of hubcaps. The raccoon hissed, flipped them off, Rowan swore it did—and vanished into the scrap with a victorious chitter.

Rowan stared at the bleeding bite mark.

“...God.. DAMMIT,” they whispered, voice cracking. "I fucking hate this place.."

They wrapped it poorly with a scrap of cloth torn from their shirt, because of course they had no bandages, and kept going. Because what else were they supposed to do? Go back empty-handed and explain they lost a fight to a raccoon?

No.

Absolutely not.

Ten minutes later, while crawling under a half-buried truck, Rowan felt something brush their ankle.

They froze.

Slowly.. looked down.

Snake.

A desert snake. Coiled. Annoyed. Judging them.

“...no,” they whispered.

The snake struck.

"F—!"

Pain like fire lanced up their leg as fangs sank in, and Rowan screamed, scrambling backward so fast they smacked their head on the axle.

"ARE YOU KIDDING ME—"

They kicked wildly, heart slamming against their ribs, vision tunneling as the snake slithered away like it had appointments to keep. Rowan lay there gasping, clutching their ankle, sweat pouring down their face.

Bitten. *Again.*

"Cool," they laughed weakly, lying flat in the dirt. "Cool cool cool. This is fine. This is how today goes."

They sat up, tied another absolutely useless tourniquet, and staggered to their feet, limping now, body screaming at them to stop.

They did not stop.

Because the desert wasn't done.

Rowan was hobbling past a pile of rusted washing machines when the ground shook.

A guttural snort split the air.

Rowan turned just in time to see a javelina barreling straight toward them like a furry battering ram of pure hostility.

"Oh COME ON—"

They ran.

Or tried to.

Which was ambitious, considering the limp.

The javelina chased them clear across the yard, hooves pounding, dust flying, Rowan shrieking incoherently as they vaulted over scrap heaps and tripped over absolutely everything in existence.

"I AM NOT MASSACRING A FAMILY FOR A CAR BATTERY—"

They dove behind a refrigerator. The javelina slammed into it, denting the metal with a furious squeal before losing interest and charging off into the distance.

Rowan lay there, gasping, staring at the sky.

And still..

Still

They kept searching.

They smashed their elbow on a doorframe. Cut their palm on glass. Dropped a battery directly on their foot. Got sunburned in places they didn't know could burn. Their canteen ran dry right when they needed it most.

A nail through the boot.

A hornet nest they absolutely did not see.

A collapse of scrap that sent a fender smacking them square in the ribs.

At one point, they slipped, fell flat on their back, and just stared at the sky, laughing hysterically.

"This," they wheezed, "this is harder than murder."

The sun began to dip. Shadows stretched long and cruel. Rowan stood in the middle of the junkyard, bleeding, bitten, filthy, shaking, empty-handed.

They looked like hell.

They felt worse.

And the worst part?

They still didn't have the *damn* battery.

Rowan wiped their face with shaking hands and swallowed hard. Because going back meant facing the family. And not going back meant... well. The desert had already made its opinion very clear.

Rowan's luck did not simply run out. It tripped, fell down a flight of stairs, caught fire, and then came back to spit in their face.

"I WILL NOT DO IT," they shouted at the sun, voice hoarse. "I WILL NOT KILL A NICE DEER FAMILY... FOR A STUPID BATTERY—DO YOU HEAR ME—"

The desert did not answer.

It just baked them harder.

By the time the sun began to dip, Rowan was filthy, bleeding, limping, bitten, stung, scratched, and absolutely feral with exhaustion.

They stood in the middle of the junkyard, arms spread, laughing weakly.

"...fine," they muttered. "You win. I tried the easy way."

They picked up the shotgun.

Not to use it.

Just to lean on it.

Because somehow somehow.. this had still been better than the alternative.

Rowan barely made it back.

By the time the house came into view, they were dragging themselves across the dirt like a corpse that had misplaced its dignity. Shirt torn and crusted with blood. One boot half-destroyed. Arms nicked, bitten, swollen. Sunburned to hell. Dehydrated enough to feel their organs filing a formal complaint.

They shoved the door open with their shoulder.

It creaked.

John looked up from the table.

He blinked once. Slowly. Antlers tilting slightly as he took in the full disaster in front of him.

“...wow,” he said flatly. “You look like shit.”

Rowan didn’t even have the energy to be offended. They just stood there, swaying slightly, eyes glassy, breathing like they’d run a marathon while being chased by Satan himself.

Jane gasped.

“Oh my goodness—Rowan!” She was on her feet instantly, hooves clopping hurriedly across the floor as she reached for them, soft doe ears pinning back in alarm. “What happened to you?”

Rowan opened their mouth.

Nothing came out.

Jane gently grabbed their arm, and immediately recoiled when she saw the bite marks, the swelling, the dried blood. “Oh no, no, no—sit down, please, sit—John, get the water—”

John snorted, leaning back in his chair, arms crossed. His tail flicked with poorly hidden amusement. “I told you the junkyard was a bad idea,” he said. “Didn’t know humans fell apart this easy, though.”

Rowan collapsed into a chair before gravity made the decision for them.

Jane shoved a glass of water into their hands, fussing like a hurricane. “Drink. Slowly. Oh sweetheart, you’re shaking.. did something attack you?”

John chuckled. “Something *clearly* won.”

Rowan took a long, desperate sip, hands trembling. In their head, a very calm, very tired voice screamed,

You're welcome, you antlered bastard. I got mauled by the entire ecosystem so I wouldn't have to kill you and your entire fucking family.

But out loud?

They just croaked, "Desert's... unfriendly."

Jane dabbed at a cut on their temple with a cloth, her nose wrinkling sympathetically. "You poor thing... you should've come back sooner. You're hurt all over."

John leaned forward, squinting. "You bleeding because of a raccoon?"

Rowan shot him a weak glare.

"...maybe."

John burst out laughing, shoulders shaking. "A raccoon. Unbelievable."

Rowan clenched their jaw.

I hope you choke on grass, they thought sweetly.

Jane shot John a look, ears flicking sharply. "That's enough. Go get the first aid kit."

John rolled his eyes but stood, muttering, "Didn't even get a battery, did you?"

Rowan swallowed.

"...no."

Jane's expression softened immediately. "That's alright. You tried. That's more than enough."

John paused at the doorway, glancing back at Rowan with narrowed eyes. "Hm," he said. "Guess tomorrow we talk about other options."

Rowan felt their stomach drop.

Jane squeezed their shoulder gently. "You rest. We'll figure it out."

Rowan nodded, exhausted, aching, guilt sitting heavy in their chest as they stared down at their hands.

Because they knew.

Tomorrow, there wouldn't be an easy way out.

And Mojave was counting on that.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapters gonna get real gorey and horrific soon. We're about to take the term "homewrecking" into an ENTIRELY different level 💧

Chapter 5: Homewrecker

Chapter Notes



Domestic violence, child death, explicit gore, forced kissing, decapitation

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Rowan had barely managed to get their wounds dressed, each bandage a sticky, stinging reminder of how every step today had been a gamble with the desert itself. They finally crawled into the guest bedroom, dragging their aching body across the thin mattress like a corpse resigned to temporary reprieve. For a few blessed minutes, it felt like relief. Finally, a soft surface, a quiet space, a place where they weren't being hunted, bitten, or mocked by the sun.

And then the nightmare started.

At first, it was subtle. A weight on their chest. A pressure that was wrong, foreign, and invasive. Groggy, half-dreaming, Rowan blinked against the low moonlight filtering through the blinds. Hands. Hands on them. Fingers tracing over the collar of their shirt, slipping beneath the fabric. A groan of confusion escaped their lips. Their pulse skyrocketed before they were fully awake.

"Jane... what—" Rowan's voice was cracked, strangled, half-sleep, half-panic.

The hands tightened, pressing, moving deliberately, audaciously. Jane Doe's elongated doe fingers rested on their shoulders, slid across their torso, the pressure unnatural, intimate, invasive. The snout leaned down closer. The first kiss landed. Wrong. Horrifically wrong. A deer's mouth on a human's lips. Rowan gagged against the sensation, panic flaring.

Jane was on top of them, straddling their hips with unnerving ease. Her elongated muzzle pressed insistently against Rowan's face. Her eyes, impossibly wide and bright in the dim light, shimmered with a desperate, almost manic intensity.

"You... don't understand," she murmured, voice low, vibrating with need. "The moment you showed up... I've wanted you. You just... walking in, all human and helpless... it's everything I've been waiting for."

Rowan pushed weakly, hands catching the fabric of her clothing, trying to put space between them. "Jane... this.. this isn't right. You—your husband—he'll—"

"Shhh..." She silenced them with a finger. Her forearms pressed down on either side of Rowan's face, and the deer's eyes bore into them, unblinking, almost predatory. "It doesn't

matter,” she hissed, her voice trembling but feral. “It won’t matter. Not tonight. Not ever again.”

Her body pressed forward, pinning Rowan’s arms against the bed. “I’m... sick of him,” she whispered, each word punctuated with shuddering need. “Sick of this life. Sick of his anger, his bitterness... I want you. I need you. I’ll go anywhere you go... far away... just you and me. You’ll take me, won’t you?”

Rowan’s mind spun. Every instinct screamed to flee. fight. get out. But Jane was on top of them, murmuring, touching, whispering in ways that made Rowan’s skin crawl with both fear and horror.

“I’ll be... so good for you,” Jane breathed, teeth grazing just beneath the human jaw, impossible in its intimacy. “Anything you want... I’ll do it. Anything. I’ll be your... housewife... obedient... devoted... just take me away. Please... take me...”

Her hands roamed, tugged at collars, pushed against their chest, slipping lower. Her voice got manic, urgent, begging, lewd in ways that twisted the already unsettling air around them. “You’ll never find someone like me... I can love you... I can be yours completely... I can do everything... everything... for you...”

Panic and revulsion churned in their stomach. This was no longer just morally wrong, it was physically terrifying. Her snout pressed against their neck now, breathing warm and wet across their ear.

Rowan’s chest heaved. Their hands flailed, hitting the sheets, the bed, anything to get the deer off them. “This... this is not okay! Stop! You can’t—this... it’s... it’s wrong!”

Jane didn’t relent. Her desperate, manic need for escape, for obsession, for anything beyond the prison of her marriage, twisted into something grotesque. Her words grew darker, more persuasive. “It doesn’t matter. Your kindness, your hesitation... I can feel it. I know you won’t hurt me. You could stop me, but you won’t. Take me. Take me away. Make me yours. Just one night... one chance...”

The room smelled faintly of woodsmoke and sweat, the moonlight falling over Jane’s disturbingly humanized yet utterly animalistic form. Rowan’s pulse hammered, their breath shallow and ragged, trapped beneath the weight of something that should not exist. Something that shouldn’t want them in this way. Something... not entirely human.

And in that moment, Rowan understood.. escaping Mojave wasn’t the only danger.

The world was full of monsters. Some of them walked on two legs and called themselves prey.

Rowan’s chest heaved, heart hammering so violently it felt like it might rip right through their ribs. “NO! This is wrong! You can’t—this isn’t—” Their voice cracked under the weight of panic and exhaustion, the heat of the room pressing in like a physical force. Hands trembling, they shoved against Jane’s waist, pushing her off with as much strength as their battered, sore body could muster. Her limbs scrambled against the sheets, soft fur brushing

against skin, her eyes wide and desperate, but Rowan didn't care. This is wrong. This is not happening. *I can't do this.*

And then the lights flickered on.

John.

The massive buck stood in the doorway, chest heaving, nostrils flaring, eyes blazing amber fire. The sight of Rowan with Jane on top, hands on her waist, clothing slightly askew... it was like a spark in a powder keg. His voice ripped through the room, loud, sharp, furious. "What the fuck is this?!"

Jane bolted upright, panicked, ears twitching, tail flicking nervously behind her. "John! No! I—It's not—" Her words stumbled over themselves in a frantic, desperate cascade, trying to explain, to put the impossible into plausible terms.

Rowan scrambled backward, still reeling, desperate to make themselves heard, hands raised. "No! She did this! I didn't—" But John wasn't listening. His antlers seemed to bristle in anger, his jaw tensed, eyes locking on Jane as though she had personally destroyed every fragment of his life.

"Again?!" His voice broke, hoarse with frustration. "How many times, Jane? How many fucking times do I have to deal with this?!"

The yelling ricocheted off the walls, the small bedroom vibrating with tension. Rowan's stomach twisted in knots as the reality of the situation slammed into them, they were human, in the middle of this anthropomorphic nightmare, and completely powerless to stop this domestic explosion from raining down on them.

John's eyes blazed with fury, every muscle in his broad frame taut. "I lost my job because of this! I had to pack up our lives because of you! Because of your... your whore hands and your inability to keep them to yourself! Do you have any idea what I've lost?!"

Jane's eyes filled, but not with remorse, anger, frustration, years of pent-up misery. She snapped back, voice high and jagged. "And how do you think I feel, John?! You hardly love me anymore! You've made me miserable for years! I needed... I needed someone to care for me, just once! And maybe you're too blind, too busy wallowing in your own self-righteousness to see it!"

Rowan's head was spinning. Sweat dripped down their neck, hair sticking to their forehead. Every instinct screamed for escape, for removal from this living hell. Their eyes flicked between Jane, straddling the thin line between predator and prey, and John, every muscle in his frame coiled, antlers jabbing the air like weapons, voice booming with fury.

From behind John, a small shuffle. John Jr, wide-eyed and concerned, peeked into the room, ears flattening slightly. "What's... happening?" The boy's voice trembled, unsure, afraid, the tension in his father's body radiating like heat from the sun itself.

But neither adult seemed to notice.

“Do you know what you’ve done to me?!” John yelled, pacing a tight circle around the room, hooves clicking sharply against the floorboards. “You’ve destroyed everything! I worked myself raw and you—” He stopped, nostrils flaring, voice dropping low and dangerous, “you just can’t help yourself, can you? No self respect, no boundaries, no—”

Jane, breathing hard, hands fisting at her sides, shouted over him. “And you think I haven’t suffered?! Think I’m happy in this... in this cage? You think I wanted this life, this misery, this dead routine with a man who looks at me like I’m some trophy to be policed?! I wanted love! Just once, real love! I wasn’t hurting anyone else, I—”

Rowan’s hands were shaking so violently, their mind was spinning in chaotic loops, trying to calculate a way out, a safe escape, a way to disappear without leaving themselves or anyone else worse off. “I... I should go,” they whispered, voice trembling, raw, desperate.

They began grabbing their scattered things, jacket flung over an arm, shotgun hoisted awkwardly. Every movement was frantic, clumsy, fueled by fear and adrenaline. Their heart hammered, lungs burning from the stress and the suffocating heat inside the small, angry room.

Rowan’s fingers were trembling. They were just inches from the front door when John’s voice cut through the chaos, low and venomous. “You think you can just walk out after this? You think you can ruin my life and leave? Not a chance. She needs to learn to respect me and you’re not leaving until that happens.”

Before Rowan could react, John lunged. The world seemed to tilt violently as his massive antlered frame slammed into them. Rowan hit the floor with a sharp thump, the ground scraping their palms as John pinned them down, hooves digging into the floorboards, chest pressing against theirs with terrifying force. The air left Rowan’s lungs in a rush, their neck trapped beneath the weight of raw, coiled deer-muscle strength.

Jane screamed, the sound piercing through Rowan’s skull. “John! STOP! You’re going to kill THEM!” Her hooves scrabbled on the floor, desperately trying to reach him, her muzzle shaking, eyes wild, shining with panic.

John Jr. stood frozen, trembling, tears streaming down his face as he clutched at nothing, paralyzed by the violence erupting around him. An innocent bystander swallowed by the chaos.

Rowan gasped, hands scrabbling for leverage, muscles straining against John’s impossible weight. Their vision blurred at the edges, panic clawing at their mind. Every second felt like a decade as the air was squeezed from their lungs. Their fingers brushed the cold metal of the shotgun beside them, just out of reach.

With a burst of desperation, Rowan managed to inch it closer. Fingers curling around the stock, hands slick with sweat, blood, and tears. They wrenched it toward themselves, lifting it, heart hammering violently against ribs and throat. Every ounce of motion was agony, every breath a struggle.

John's snarling face loomed over them, antlers scraping the floorboards, eyes blazing with fury. "This is all your fault! You think you can just—"

Rowan pulled the trigger.

As the shotgun blast tore through the room with a deafening roar. John's body jerked grotesquely, a sickening spray of blood and antler fragments exploding from his chest. The crimson mist hung in the air for a moment before raining down, splattering Rowan's face and clothes. but... a horrifying, gut-wrenching realization hit Rowan mid-scream.

Behind him,

directly behind him,

was John Jr.

The bullet tore through John's chest with a sickening, meaty ripping noise, the force of the impact literally shredding flesh and bone. It exited his back in a blaze of blood and shattered bone fragments, the searing metal instantly cauterizing the wound on its way through.

The bloody projectile smacked into the back of John Jr.'s skull with a sickening, wet crunching noise that defied description. The boy's head snapped forward from the impact, his vertebrae shattering like kindling wood. Blood erupted from his shattered skull, painting the wall behind him with a sickening, red fan.

Jane's scream was something primal, inhuman, the sound of a mother losing her child in the most horrific way imaginable. She lunged for her son, falling to her knees in the growing pool of blood, slimy clumps of skull fragments and brain matter. Her hooves splashed in the crimson pond, churning the blood into frothy red bubbles.

Rowan saw the terrible wound, the way the back of the boy's skull was nothing more than a splintered, jagged hole, bits of bone and brain matter clinging grotesquely to the edges. The slug had destroyed the entire back half of his head, leaving only a misshapen, bloody ruin where his face used to be. His small, lifeless body twitched and spasmed in Jane's arms, limbs jerking like a broken doll.

Jane's screams intensified as she clutched her son's body to her chest, blood smeared across her face. The coppery stench of blood and the cloying scent of gunpowder choked the air, burning Rowan's throat. The sound of Jane's anguished wails echoed off the blood-spattered walls, the cries of a creature suffering the most unimaginable loss.

Rowan struggled to breathe, lungs burning as if on fire. Their skin crawled with the sensation of John's cooling blood, still sticky and tacky. The shotgun slipped from their trembling fingers, clattering to the floor as Rowan clutched at their throat, gasping for air. The room spun and tilted, the macabre scene before them burning into their brain, seared into their memory for all eternity.

They trembled over what they had just done, heart racing, mind screaming at itself in loops of disbelief, guilt, and terror.

Jane's wails tore through the house, every sound a knife twisting in Rowan's chest. She shoved past them, frantic, desperate to get away, dragging herself and the boy's lifeless body toward... somewhere, anywhere, away from the nightmare Rowan had inadvertently unleashed.

Rowan remained frozen for a heartbeat, trembling violently, hands slick on the shotgun, eyes wide and unblinking. The room was a storm of chaos, grief, and blood, the air alive with the sound of someone's world utterly, irreparably shattered.

They had not wanted this. Not even a little. Not in a million twisted ways. And yet here they were, trembling over a tragedy they could never undo, the smell of blood and panic thick in their nose, hands shaking, mind spinning, utterly aware that there was no going back.

Jane's frantic distant screaming brought them back to reality, followed by the high pitched unnatural gurgling of a dying deer.

John Jr.

Rowan quickly stood up, stumbling out of the house, boots crunching on the scorched desert dirt, shotgun clutched in shaking hands. Their chest heaved, eyes stinging from smoke, blood, and tears as they caught sight of Jane darting ahead, her frantic screams tearing through the still morning air like a torn throat. Her hooves dug into the sand with impossible speed, leaving uneven tracks that carved a path of chaos behind her.

Cradled in her arms was John Jr, limp and pale, yet still making those horrifying, broken, deer-like gurgles, sounds that should have been sweet, childlike, innocent. Instead, each cry was a wet, ragged, stabbing note of agony that made Rowan's stomach twist violently. The boy's limbs hung awkwardly, jerking spasmodically with each painful breath, eyes half-lidded and glazed, completely unaware of the world but painfully alive.

"JANE! Wait! Please!"

Rowan shouted, voice hoarse and cracking, heat and panic thick in their throat. Every step they took sank into the gritty sand as if the desert itself was trying to hold them back.

"Stop! I didn't have a CHOICE! I had to—he was.. he was attacking me! I'm so sorry! Im so fucking sorry!" Their voice cracked, repeated over and over, a mantra of guilt. "I didn't WANT to hurt him! I'm not going to hurt you! I promise, I'm not gonna hurt you!"

Jane's head jerked, ears flattening against her skull as her wide, terrified eyes flicked toward Rowan. Her face, usually soft and gentle, was twisted with pure panic and uncomprehending horror. "Don't! You'll—" she screamed, muffled through her muzzle as she pressed John Jr. closer, as if shielding him from the horror that had just erupted inside their home. "You'll— You'll kill me! You'll kill him too!"

"No! I—NO!" Rowan cried, their hands shook violently as they aimed the shotgun low, intentionally not pointing it at her, trying desperately to look non-threatening. "I didn't want this! I didn't want ANY OF THIS!"

Jane's ears twitched violently, tail flicking erratically, and she veered sharply to the side, sand spraying around them, still running, still screaming, still clutching John Jr. like a lifeline. Her small, desperate eyes darted between Rowan and the boy, uncomprehending, frantic, her mind fractured by trauma. She was convinced Rowan was the next threat, convinced that the human who had just butchered her husband was going to finish them off.

"You have to—he's—he's dying!" Rowan screamed, voice breaking, tears streaking the dust and grime on their face. "He's gone! He's beyond saving! You... you have to stop! You can't fix him by running! You have to put him down!"

Jane froze for a fraction of a heartbeat, panic and denial warring in her glowing, doe eyes. "N-no... I can... I can save him! I can fix him! I can—" Her voice cracked into an incoherent wail as her hooves twisted awkwardly in the sand, nearly toppling her. The boy's whimpers.. broken, guttural, tortured sounds filled the air, each one making Rowan's stomach turn and chest tighten. Every twitch of his broken body was like a knife digging into their gut.

Rowan stumbled to their knees in front of her, shotgun low and useless in its intimidation, hands shaking as they reached out. "Jane... please. Look at him. He's... he's not going to make it. None of this will help if you keep running. You can't save him. You have to let him go... just... just put him down." Their voice was raw, hoarse, soaked with fear and guilt and helplessness, every word weighed down with the crushing weight of inevitability.

Her ears pinned flat, snout trembling, eyes wide and glossy with tears. "No... I... I won't... I can't..." She rocked back and forth, shaking violently, the boy's limp body pressed to her chest. Every instinct screamed for Rowan to intervene, but the girl, or doe, whatever she was.. was a force of grief and panic. She didn't comprehend the reality, only the impossible, unbearable thought of losing her child.

Rowan's throat ached with the effort of shouting, pleading, reasoning, begging. "Jane! Listen to me! You're hurting him by holding on! He can't come back from this! You... you're going to watch him die slowly if you keep running. You have to let him go!" Their hands shook violently, fingers brushing against her arm in desperate attempts to make her understand.

Jane's screams were raw, primal, unrelenting, reverberating across the empty landscape, echoing off the distant rock formations like a funeral dirge. Her body was draped entirely over John Jr, arms clutching him, legs curling around him, her weight pressing down in a grotesque, desperate cocoon of denial. Every sob she tore from her throat made Rowan's chest twist with guilt and horror.

The boy's muffled gurgles pierced through her cries, ragged and agonizing, and Rowan realized, with a bone-deep, paralyzing horror, that Jane would never let go.

She wasn't capable of rational thought right now, maybe she'd never be capable again.

She had watched her husband die in her home, her child mutilated and broken in front of her, and now the weight of grief and trauma had transformed her mind into something unrecognizable.

Rowan's stomach churned, bile rising, as they watched John Jr.'s spasms become slower, weaker, each gasp for air a stabbing note of unbearable agony. They swallowed hard, throat tight, heart hammering against ribs like it wanted to escape. There was no other way. None. This nightmare could not continue.

With trembling hands, Rowan slowly stood, every movement deliberate, every step heavier than the last. They leveled the shotgun, shaking, tears streaking across the dust and blood plastered to their face. Their voice was raw, hoarse, barely above a whisper, carrying both resignation and unbearable sorrow.

"I... I'm so fucking sorry," they said, voice breaking, knuckles white around the stock of the weapon. "I didn't want this. None of this. But... it has to end. I... I can't let him or you live like this..."

The shotgun fired once again,

the blast echoing violently across the barren desert. The recoil bit into Rowan's shoulder as they dropped the weapon slightly, and the silence that followed was deafening.

Jane's frantic screams cut short, her body crumpling against the sand.

John Jr.'s gurgling stopped, his small form limp in her arms.

For the first time in what felt like an eternity, the desert was quiet. The wind whispered softly through the scrub brush, indifferent to the carnage sprawled beneath the sun. Rowan stood there, shaking, covered in blood from head to toe, human and deer, predator and prey, morality and horror, all smeared together in one grotesque tableau.

They swallowed, lungs aching, stomach twisting, stomach filled with bile and disbelief. The ground beneath them seemed impossibly hot, impossibly empty. Rowan's mind spun, trying to comprehend what had just happened.

The husband, the wife, the child.. gone. Every moral fiber shredded by the inevitability of survival, the cruel machinations of Mojave's design.

And then it hit them, cold and merciless, this was exactly what Mojave wanted.

Rowan's hands shook, the shotgun dangling uselessly at their side, as they stared at the still forms before them. The desert sun blazed overhead, a merciless witness to the quiet horror. Rowan's knees buckled slightly, and for a long moment, they just stood there, drenched in blood, alone in the vast, empty nothingness, realizing the horrifying truth of what survival, desperation, and Mojave's twisted games had demanded.

The wind carried away the faint smell of gunpowder, blood, and the finality of life itself. And Rowan knew there was no going back.

Rowan dragged the wagon through the desert, muscles screaming and lungs burning, the bloodied forms of John, Jane, and John Jr. crammed into the battered cart. Every few steps, bile rose unbidden, and Rowan had to stumble off to the side, retching violently into the scrubby brush. Their stomach heaved, dry heat and horror churning together, but they forced themselves back to the wagon, wiping their mouth with a trembling sleeve before continuing the grotesque haul. The moon seemed to glare at them personally, turning every movement into a labor of punishment.

It took hours, two grueling days of dragging, stopping, vomiting, and dragging again, before they finally crested the last hill leading to Mojave's small home. Rowan's hands were raw, knuckles split, fingers slick with blood. With a final, exhausted effort, they rammed the wagon into the shed, hearing the groan of the wood under the unnatural weight. The interior was dim, lit by a flickering overhead bulb. A large table dominated the center of the room, surrounded by knives, hooks, saws, and other tools, all gleaming ominously. Rowan's stomach lurched as they looked down at the still, bloodied forms. They wanted to collapse, to run, to throw up again, but they forced themselves to breathe, bile rising threateningly in their throat.

And then he was there.

Mojave stepped from the shadows, lanky, his movements fluid and deliberate, like a predator stalking across a tightrope. The light caught the curve of his ears, the slit of his pupils, the delicate whiskers trembling as he tilted his head to inspect the grisly scene.

"Oh, this took far too long," Mojave purred, voice casual, detached, as if Rowan had been making macaroni art instead of committing a slaughter. "Two entire days... I didn't expect you'd dilly-dally this long. But... I'm glad. I'm so glad you finally completed the job. I was this close to finishing it myself."

He padded forward, limbs moving with that uncanny feline grace, leaning low to examine the gore with a disturbingly delicate attentiveness. "Look at that muscle tone... the limp, lifeless grace. Doesn't it just sing to you? The tension in the bones, the subtle give of flesh under a careful hand... oh, it's exquisite." His tongue darted out briefly to wet his lips, catlike eyes narrowing in what could only be called admiration.

Mojave's head snapped toward them, ears flicking. His gaze pinned Rowan where they stood, sharp and unyielding. "Did you like it?" he asked softly, circling them now like a feline inspecting prey. "Did you enjoy the crunch of bones breaking? Did it make your heart pound? Did you like it? Be honest. I'll know if you lie."

Rowan shook their head violently, backing against the wall, tears streaking dirt and blood across their face. "No! I... it was... horrific! It was nothing I wanted to do! I... I had no choice, I swear!"

Mojave tilted his head, whiskers twitching, one clawed hand lifted lazily as though to punctuate his next words. "Everyone has a choice," he said softly, almost a whisper, yet somehow cutting through Rowan's very spine. He stepped closer, catlike eyes gleaming, the curve of his smile slow, predatory. "You chose to do this. You chose to follow through. That's all anyone ever really asks."

He leaned close enough that Rowan could smell the faint coppery tang of his fur and blood on his claws. “And now...” Mojave purred, stepping back gracefully, claws flexing, shoulders moving in a fluid, stalking rhythm, “you’ll see just how rewarding choice can be.”

Rowan’s stomach churned violently, bile and blood mixing as they staggered back against the wall, shotgun trembling in their hands, fully comprehending the depth of Mojave’s twisted pride and the dark, predator-like philosophy behind his admiration.

The desert silence pressed in around them, broken only by the faint hum of the flickering bulb and Mojave’s soft, deliberate movements, as he circled, observed, and silently judged the trembling human who had become his instrument.

Mojave stepped forward. He reached into the wagon and hauled one of the bloodied bodies out with a casual ease that made Rowan’s stomach twist. The corpse thudded onto the center table with a sickening smack, and Rowan flinched, hands gripping the shotgun like it was their lifeline.

“Watch closely,”

Mojave said softly, voice almost conversational, like he was describing a recipe instead of dismembering a human-deer hybrid. His clawed fingers traced along the contours of the corpse’s arms, lingering over the pale muscles and the subtle tension left behind in the frozen limbs. “Arms first,” he murmured, eyes glinting with that strange feline intensity. “See how easily they yield? A firm, clean pull... ah, the subtle resistance. Almost meditative.”

Rowan gagged, stepping back instinctively, eyes wide and shaking. Mojave didn’t flinch. He crouched low. He lifted a saw with one fluid motion. The blade bit through the arm with a wet, precise *shhhhk*, and Mojave hummed softly, tilting his head as if inspecting a canvas.

“Look at that... the way the flesh parts, the muscle fibers stretching just so... the faint tremble as life leaves the joint... sublime,” he said, almost lovingly, as he repeated the motions with the second arm. His ears flicked forward, whiskers twitching, pupils narrowing, as though he was savoring the sound of the blade against bone and sinew.

“Legs next,”

he continued, standing for a moment to stretch his arms, bending with that uncanny, feline flexibility, his back arching almost impossibly before lunging back down. “Precision is key. The curve of the cut... the slow, deliberate detachment... it’s relaxing, isn’t it? Like watching a painting unfold stroke by stroke.”

Rowan stumbled back, gagging, eyes watering, fists clenched so tight they ached. “I... I can’t... I can’t look...” they whispered, voice trembling.

Mojave’s head tilted, ears flicking with mild amusement. “Oh, don’t be so dramatic,” he purred. “You wanted to do this, remember? You chose to follow through. Observe the beauty in the inevitability. The body bends, the limbs obey... perfection in motion.”

Finally, Mojave leaned over the corpse, knife in hand, slicing through the neck with clinical, graceful precision. The head rolled slightly, and he lowered it into the designated pile while gesturing to the other pieces. “Now... to the basement,” he said, voice low, almost tender. He lifted the remaining limbs, the torso, and arranged them with careful attention before hauling the first pieces down the creaking stairs.

Rowan’s stomach twisted violently, bile rising again as they stared, frozen and trembling. Mojave’s tail bone flicked lazily, ears swiveling like a predator surveying prey, his eyes gleaming with unsettling satisfaction. “See?” he said softly, turning to Rowan. “Efficiency. Precision. Calm. You could do this too... if you embraced the process.”

Rowan shook their head violently, stomach churning, chest heaving. “I... I could never...” they whispered, voice barely audible over the distant echo of the basement doors closing. Mojave’s gaze followed them, unblinking, predatory, and almost amused.

“Of course you could,” he said, stepping closer, claws flexing slightly as he circled. “You already have... you just need to accept it. Life... death... the inevitability of it all. Now, grab the next one. We’ve still got two more to make perfect.”

Rowan’s hands shook violently around the shotgun, bile rising, body trembling as they realized the full, horrifying weight of what they were being dragged into. Mojave, calm and precise, continued, humming softly as if this were merely an afternoon pastime, the predator in him perfectly at ease with the grotesque artistry of it all.

“Take care of the other two. Follow my method. Precision, patience... calm. Then, once you’ve finished, come see me inside the house. Don’t linger. Don’t waste time.”

Rowan’s legs felt like molten lead. Their hands shook so badly that gripping the shotgun, or rather, the tools Mojave had thrust into their grip, was a battle in itself. Every muscle in their body screamed to run, to vomit, to collapse, but there was only one thought that pushed them forward, one more step, one more act, then the car battery, then leave this nightmare behind.

They stepped closer to the first of the two remaining bodies, bile rising hot in their throat. Their hands hovered over the limp, bloodied form, and for a moment, they froze entirely, trembling as their mind refused to accept what they were about to do. The smell.. iron, copper, warm flesh made them gag. Their stomach heaved, but they forced themselves to focus.

“Arms... like Mojave,” they whispered to themselves, voice quivering. They grabbed the first arm, trying to mimic the fluid motion Mojave had displayed, but their fingers slipped, hitting the table with a squish that made Rowan flinch and stumble backward. The second arm resisted more than expected, tendons taut, and Rowan’s face twisted with a mixture of nausea and fear.

They forced a shaky breath, gripping the tool tighter, teeth clenching against the rising bile. Slowly... painstakingly... they followed Mojave’s method. One arm first, then the next. Each cut made their hands shake violently, sweat stinging their eyes. Their knees wobbled under the strain of both physical exertion and sheer terror.

Next came the legs. Rowan's hands trembled uncontrollably as they tried to slice through the joints cleanly. The warm, sticky resistance of muscle and sinew made their stomach twist into knots. Every inhale brought the metallic scent of blood to their nose, a nauseating, cloying reminder of the grotesque reality of the task. Rowan gagged and nearly vomited, their body jerking against their own disgust.

The torso was... worse. Hands slippery with blood, knuckles white as they forced themselves to keep going. Every movement felt alien, unnatural. Their ears rang, heart pounding, breath shallow and rapid. Their stomach churned, bile burning up into their throat, but they couldn't stop. The image of Mojave's cold, unblinking eyes hovering in the corner of their vision pushed them forward like a predator snapping at their heels.

Finally, the head. Rowan's hands shook so violently they barely managed to hold it steady, eyes watering uncontrollably. The neck resisted, the warm weight of the lifeless body pushing against them, but Rowan forced the motion, cutting through with a trembling hand, their knuckles slick with blood. A strangled, awful sound escaped them as the task finished.

Rowan staggered back, chest heaving, gagging violently, bile dripping down their chin. They stumbled over to the basement door, dragging the remains with as much dignity as their shaking body could manage.

Each step was a mental battle, every breath filled with the oppressive, suffocating horror of what they had just done. They lowered the first body carefully, though their hands shook uncontrollably, then the second, finally collapsing against the wall, knees weak, shaking from head to toe.

They wiped their bloodied hands across their clothes, eyes wide and glassy, stomach still heaving, and muttered under their breath, "I... I can't believe I just did that... I can't... oh god..."

By the time the last weight thumped into the basement, Rowan's arms felt hollow. Not sore, just.. empty. Like whatever strength they'd had had leaked out with the blood and never bothered to come back.

They stood at the top of the basement stairs for a long moment, one hand on the door, staring down into the dark. Nothing moved. Nothing breathed. The silence wasn't peaceful.. it was *accusatory*.

Rowan swallowed hard, wiped their hands uselessly against their already-ruined clothes, and turned toward the house.

Chapter End Notes

Oh deer.

Chapter 6: Conditioning Takes Time

Inside, the air felt wrong in a different way. As if the walls themselves hadn't noticed what had just been dragged through the yard.

Mojave stood in the living room, hands dangling to his side as he stared at a painting on the wall. Some blurry abstract picture of what looked like something demonic, most likely possessed. He didn't turn when Rowan entered. He didn't have to. He already knew they were there.

"*That*," Mojave said calmly, head tilting just slightly, ears twitching, "was some excellent work out there."

Rowan flinched.

"Messy," Mojave continued, thoughtfully. "I expected that. You're still new. But thorough. Commitment matters more than elegance at first." He finally turned, eyes dragging over Rowan from head to toe, blood crusted on their sleeves, dark stains soaking their pants, flecks dried along their jaw and neck. His pupils widened almost imperceptibly.

A slow smile spread across his face.

"But," he added, his voice dropped, like a parent asking about their child's report card, "it did take you a while."

He stepped closer, paws silent on the floor.

"So tell me," Mojave said, head canting like a cat watching something struggle, "why... did it take you so long to kill them?"

Rowan's mouth opened.

Nothing came out.

What were they supposed to say? I was trying to save them. I was trying to find a car battery so I wouldn't have to end an entire family. I tried to do the right thing and it got everyone killed anyway.

Their throat tightened. Their head throbbed. The truth felt too big, too fragile.. like if they tried to explain it, it would shatter and cut them open all over again.

So instead, quietly, weakly, Rowan said,
"Family problems."

For a split second, Mojave just stared at them.

Then he laughed.

Not loud. Not cruel. Just a low, amused sound, like something pleasantly confirmed. His shoulders shook slightly, tail flicking in lazy approval.

“Oh,” he said, smiling wider, “aren’t they always?”

He circled Rowan slowly, pawsteps soundless, eyes never leaving them. He reached out, not touching, just hovering, as if appreciating a sculpture.

“You know,” Mojave murmured, “covered in blood like that... exhausted... hollow-eyed...” He gestured vaguely at Rowan’s ruined state. “You look like a painting yourself. Very honest. Very raw.”

Rowan felt sick.

Mojave stopped in front of them and finally met their eyes. “Go,” he said gently. “Use my shower. Get all this off you.” His lips curved upward. “Then you can tell me everything.”

He turned back toward the painting, dismissing Rowan as easily as one might set down a tool.

“And don’t worry,” he added casually, ears flicking. “We have time now.”

Rowan stood there for a moment longer, heart pounding, skin crawling, the weight of everything pressing down at once.

Then they turned toward the bathroom, every step heavy with the understanding that whatever came next... they were already too deep to pretend this was just about a car battery anymore.

The shower sputtered to life with a metallic groan, water slamming down hard and cold before warming in uneven waves. Rowan stood under it fully clothed at first, hands braced against the stained tile wall, forehead pressed into the grout as if the pressure might keep them upright.

Blood ran immediately.

It streamed from their hair, their sleeves, the cuffs of their pants, thick at first, then thinning, diluting into a pink haze that spiraled toward the drain. It pooled briefly around their bare feet before being pulled away, carrying pieces of the day with it. Someone else’s blood. Too much of it.

Rowan slid their jacket off, then their shirt, movements slow and automatic. Their hands shook when they scrubbed at their arms, their chest, their neck. The water stung every scrape and bite and half-noticed injury, but they barely reacted. Pain felt distant, secondary to the heaviness sitting in their lungs.

They leaned forward again, palms flat against the wall, shoulders rising and falling unevenly.

A spider crept along the corner of the ceiling, thin legs testing the damp air. It paused, then continued its careful journey, utterly unbothered. Rowan noticed it absently and thought,

stupidly, *at least one of us knows what it's doing.*

They stayed there until the water ran clear.

Until the drain stopped swallowing red.

Until the shower filled only with steam and the dull roar of falling water.

When they finally shut it off, the silence rang in their ears.

Folded neatly on the counter was a clean white T-shirt and a pair of cargo pants. Not theirs. Mojave's doing. The realization crawled over their skin worse than the blood had.

They dressed slowly, fabric soft and unfamiliar against their body. The white shirt felt obscene, like pretending something hadn't happened.

Then Rowan looked around.

Their breath hitched.

The gun wasn't leaning against the wall. It wasn't propped by the door. It wasn't anywhere.

Rowan stood there, damp hair dripping onto borrowed clothes, staring at the empty space where it should have been, a cold, sinking certainty settling in their stomach.

Mojave hadn't just cleaned them up.

He'd disarmed them.

And for the first time since stepping into that house, Rowan understood fully, unmistakably that whatever control they thought they still had had already gone down the drain with the blood.

Rowan stepped out of the bathroom, towel-damp hair clinging to their forehead, skin scrubbed raw and still feeling dirty. No matter how hard they'd washed, it was like the blood had soaked past skin, past muscle, into memory. Their hands flexed unconsciously, half-expecting them to still be red.

The house was quiet in that wrong way. Not peaceful. Holding its breath.

They moved down the narrow hallway, floorboards tacky under bare feet, walls stained with fingerprints that didn't look entirely human. The air smelled like old food, iron, and something medicinal that failed to cover either. Rowan checked the kitchen first. Empty. Then the back room. Empty. Their pulse thudded louder with each step.

Finally, the living room.

Mojave was sprawled across the couch like he owned the world. One leg hooked lazily over the armrest, beer bottle dangling from clawed fingers. The television flickered in front of him, casting the room in sickly greens and reds.

Whatever was on the screen wasn't a movie.

It was... close. Too close. Low-resolution footage of torn muscle fibers, something being pulled apart frame by frame. The camera shook like it was handheld, zooming in on wet textures, on things that pulsed when they shouldn't. Strange music warbled underneath it all, off-tempo, organic, like someone had fed a violin through a meat grinder. Unrecognizable organisms squirmed across the screen, half-formed, half-ruined.

Mojave's shoulders rose and fell with contentment.

Behind him, just above the waistband of his pants, the short, scarred stump of his tailbone twitched faintly, muscle memory without the limb. A little wag. A ghost of a habit he'd mutilated out of himself years ago.

Rowan froze in the doorway.

Mojave turned his head slowly, feline eyes catching the light. His pupils narrowed, not in surprise, but interest.

"Well," he said pleasantly, lifting the beer in a lazy salute. "Look at you. All fresh. Like nothing ever happened."

He glanced at the TV, then back at Rowan. "You want one?"

He nudged a second bottle off the coffee table with his foot. It rolled and stopped near Rowan's toes. "Sit," Mojave added, patting the couch beside him. Not a request. "You look like you're gonna tip over."

Rowan swallowed. Their mouth was dry again. Everything in them screamed don't, but their legs betrayed them. Slowly, stiffly, they crossed the room, grabbing the bottle and sitting on the far end of the couch, back straight, hands clenched in their lap.

Mojave watched this with open amusement, taking a long drink. The TV continued its grotesque slideshow, wet sounds leaking into the room. For a moment, he said nothing. Just looked at Rowan. Head tilted. Studying them the way a cat watches something wounded, deciding whether it's worth playing with now or later.

Then he smiled.

"Okay," he said lightly, like he was settling in for gossip. "Story time."

He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, beer dangling loosely as his claws tapped the glass. His ears twitched once, attentive. Hungry. "Tell me everything," Mojave said. "From the beginning."

His eyes flicked over Rowan, still shaking, still hollow.

"And don't you *dare* leave a single detail out."

Rowan sat there like a hostage at a slumber party from hell. The beer was sweating in their hand, untouched except for the faint tremor in their fingers. They stared very hard at the label, at the floor, at anything that wasn't the TV, because every time their eyes drifted, they caught flashes of red and movement and wet sound, and their stomach lurched all over again.

Mojave, meanwhile, was relaxed in a way that felt criminal.

Rowan started, voice low, stiff. "It was just... hard to find the right timing."

Mojave's ears flicked forward immediately.

"Oh?" he purred, leaning back, clearly delighted already.

Rowan swallowed. "They were always around each other. Always arguing. Never alone long enough for it to be.. quick."

A lie. Or at least, a half-truth wrapped in guilt.

"They fought constantly," Rowan continued, rubbing their thumb against the bottle cap until it bit into skin. "Like... every conversation turned into a fight. Job stuff. Money. Blame. I didn't even understand half of it."

Mojave chuckled softly, tail stump twitching again like it wanted to wag. "Domestic bliss," he said fondly.

Rowan hesitated. Then, quieter, "And Jane was... too interested in me."

That got a real laugh out of him.

Mojave tipped his head back, sharp teeth flashing, shoulders shaking as he laughed openly. "Of course she was."

He looked at Rowan with bright, gleaming eyes. "Prey always gets stupid around novelty."

Rowan grimaced. "She crossed a line. Multiple lines. I didn't want any of that. I swear."

"Oh, I believe you," Mojave said easily. "That's what makes it better." He shifted closer, elbows on knees again, body angling toward Rowan like a cat closing in. "Go on."

Rowan exhaled shakily and kept talking, words tumbling out now like they'd rot inside them otherwise. "John confronted me. Thought I was... you know. After his wife. He got violent." Rowan's jaw tightened. "He attacked me. He was choking me. I couldn't breathe."

Mojave's pupils widened slightly at that. Interest sharpened.

"And then?" he prompted softly.

"I grabbed the shotgun," Rowan said. "I didn't aim. I just—pulled the trigger."

Mojave hissed in appreciation. "Instinct."

Rowan's voice cracked. "The shot went through him."

They paused.

"And hit the *kid*."

Silence,

except for the TV's grotesque soundtrack.

Then Mojave burst out laughing.

"Ohhh, wow," he said, delighted. "Two for one."

Rowan flinched.

"Talk about killing two birds with one stone," Mojave added, grinning wide, eyes shining like he'd just heard a clever joke.

"That's not—" Rowan choked, mortified. "That's not funny."

Mojave waved a hand dismissively. "Funny, beautiful.. same family."

Rowan forced themselves to continue, voice hollow. "Jane ran. She was... gone. Mentally. Covered in blood. She wouldn't let go of him. He was dying. Slowly."

Mojave leaned closer now, beer forgotten, chin resting on steepled fingers. His whisker-like facial hairs twitched faintly, nostrils flaring as if he could smell the memory.

"And?" he murmured. "How did you finish it?"

Rowan squeezed their eyes shut. "I had no choice."

Mojave smiled.

"When do we ever?"

Rowan finished the story. Every word tasted like rust. When it was over, the room felt smaller. Heavier.

Mojave let out a long, satisfied breath.

"Wow," he said softly, almost reverently. He looked Rowan up and down, like appraising a sculpture. "You know what I love about this?"

Rowan didn't answer.

"You didn't just kill them," Mojave continued. "You experienced them."

He tilted his head, ears twitching, grin stretching unnaturally wide. "Fear. Rage. Desperation. Love. Loss. All in one neat little narrative."

Then he laughed again, slower this time.

“You killed three people,” Mojave said, voice warm, intimate, thrilled, “with two bullets.”

He took a sip of his beer.

“How fucking *beautiful*.”

Mojave looked like he’d just been fed.

Not physically, no, this was worse. This was the kind of satisfaction that settled behind the eyes, that slow, buzzing pleasure of someone replaying a favorite song in their head and catching new notes every time.

He leaned back into the couch, one arm draped over the backrest, posture loose, boneless. His ears twitched intermittently, reacting to nothing Rowan could hear. His mouth kept curving into that thin, pleased smile, like he was savoring a taste that hadn’t quite faded yet.

“*God*,” he said softly. “I wish I’d been there.”

Rowan’s stomach rolled.

“Not to join it,” Mojave added quickly, waving a clawed hand. “No, no. Just to watch.” His claws flexed unconsciously, retracting and extending with a faint, dry click. “But it’s fine. I’ll get the encore downstairs.”

He let out a low laugh, almost embarrassed. “Basements have better acoustics for things like that anyway.”

Rowan shifted in their seat, skin crawling. “You’re... enjoying this way too much.”

Mojave turned his head slowly toward them, pupils blown wide, expression almost fond. “Oh, sweetheart. ‘Too much’ doesn’t exist.”

He leaned forward again, elbows on his knees, spine folding at odd, feline angles, fluid but wrong, like a cat standing halfway upright and forgetting it wasn’t supposed to. His head tilted, neck craning as if he could peer into Rowan.

“You know what I love?” he murmured. “The accident.”

Rowan swallowed hard.

“The way it wasn’t clean,” Mojave continued, eyes half-lidded now. “The way the second death wasn’t planned. That’s where the honesty is. That’s where the art lives.”

He gestured vaguely, as if painting in the air. “Bone shattering isn’t loud like people think. It’s more of a crack-pop. Wet. Intimate.”

A soft sound escaped him, pleased. “And muscle... muscle tears like fabric that’s been worn too long. You can tell how someone lived just by how they come apart.”

Rowan's face went pale. "Stop."

Mojave blinked, then smiled wider. "Sorry. Habit."

He wasn't sorry.

"I don't think you realize how rare this is," he went on, voice dropping, reverent. "You didn't just kill prey. You broke a system. A family unit. A hierarchy. You watched love fail in real time."

His ears flattened briefly, then lifted again, excited. "That moment where she covered the kid? That was the peak. That's the part I'm going to replay."

Rowan stood abruptly, sick to their stomach, "...You're sick."

Mojave watched them rise like a curious cat tracking a shadow, head tilting again. His tail stump twitched, phantom motion rippling through muscle that wasn't there anymore.

"Yes," he said calmly. "And you're still here."

A moment of silence passed between them, all while the TV droned on, every wet grotesque sound reminding Rowan of the Doe family's bones breaking and falling apart.

"You didn't know depravity like this existed," Mojave said softly, eyes gleaming. "That's the fun part."

He smiled, slow and indulgent.

"Now you do."

Rowan's face twisted, pure and utter revulsion, no filter left. They shook their head once, like they were trying to fling Mojave's voice out of their skull, and took a single step forward.

"I did what you wanted," Rowan said, voice tight, raw. "Give me the car battery."

For a heartbeat, Mojave just stared at them.

Then,

laughed.

He lounged back onto the couch with exaggerated ease, limbs folding wrong again, like gravity was optional for him. He lifted the beer to his mouth, took a slow sip, throat bobbing, eyes never leaving Rowan.

"...Oh," he said mildly. "You thought we were done?"

The words landed like ice water.

"No," Mojave continued, settling deeper into the cushions, one leg draped over the armrest. "No, no. I've got more work for you."

Something in Rowan snapped.

“That’s NOT what we agreed to,” Rowan shot back, voice rising despite themselves. “You said THREE bodies. I gave you three. You promised me the battery.”

Mojave’s ears twitched.

Once.

Slowly.

The room changed.

He stood up in one smooth motion, beer set aside with deliberate care. When he straightened fully, he towered, lanky frame stretching impossibly tall, shoulders rolling back, spine arching in a way no human spine should. His claws slid out with a dry, unmistakable sound as his fingers flexed.

The calm didn’t leave his face.

That was the worst part.

He took a step forward.

Then another.

Rowan’s back hit the wall with a dull thud.

Mojave leaned in, close enough now that Rowan could see the faint scars around his mouth, the tension in his jaw, the way his pupils narrowed to predatory slits. His breath was warm. His voice was quiet.

“You don’t raise your voice at me.”

One claw lifted, pressing, not cutting, right beneath Rowan’s jaw, just enough pressure to force their chin up.

“I am not a transaction,” Mojave said softly. “I am not some NPC who hands over loot when you finish a quest.”

He smiled.

“I am the constant.”

His other hand slid to the wall beside Rowan’s head, claws biting into the wood. The house creaked around them.

“You know how fast I could do it?” he murmured. “I wouldn’t even need the knife. I’d open you from collarbone to navel, scoop out everything that makes you you, and you’d still be alive long enough to understand what you lost.”

His ears flicked forward, attentive, delighted.

“I’d hang what’s left in my shed. Let the heat do the rest. You’d dry out beautifully.”

Mojave pulled back just enough to look Rowan in the eyes, dominance absolute, inescapable.

“You’re still breathing because I allow it,” he said. “You walk when I say *walk*. You work when I say *work*.”

A thin smile curved his mouth.

“Now,” he added calmly, stepping back at last, “sit down, or we can see how fast your courage turns into screaming.”

The room was silent.

Mojave was still smiling.

Rowan didn’t answer.

They couldn’t.

Their hands were shaking too hard, violent tremors running up their arms, into their shoulders, rattling their teeth. Their back was still pressed to the wall like if they peeled themselves off it, they’d collapse into pieces and Mojave would collect them.

They were bracing. Waiting for claws. Waiting for pain.

Instead,

The lights died.

Not flickered. Not dimmed.

Just.. gone.

The TV snapped to black mid-gurgle. The house plunged into total darkness so complete it felt physical, like a blanket thrown over Rowan’s head. Rowan sucked in a sharp breath, heart slamming so hard it made their ears ring.

Silence.

Then a sharp, irritated exhale.

“—**Fuck.**”

Mojave’s voice cut through the dark, closer than Rowan liked. Too calm. Too grounded. Like the blackout was an inconvenience, not a threat.

“Generator’s out,” he muttered, tongue clicking against his teeth. “Unbelievable.”

Something shifted in the dark, bone, claws lightly scraping wood. Rowan couldn't see anything. Their eyes were useless, wide and blind, panic chewing up their lungs.

"Get to the side of the house," Mojave said. "Beat it till it remembers its purpose."

A pause.

"Same way I'll do to you if you keep up this brat bunny defiant bullshit."

Before Rowan could even process that,

A hand closed around the back of their neck.

Not crushing. Not gentle.

Claiming.

Mojave's fingers sank into muscle and skin with practiced certainty, thumb pressing just beneath the base of Rowan's skull, steering their head without effort. His grip said don't run without needing to tighten.

Rowan gasped, every instinct screaming, legs stiff as they were guided forward through the pitch black. Mojave moved like he owned the dark. Rowan stumbled once, boots catching on uneven floorboards.

"Tch," Mojave clicked. "Careful. You bruise easy."

The front door creaked open.

Moonlight spilled in, harsh and silver, slicing the darkness apart. Heat rushed in with it, thick and desert-dry. Mojave released Rowan's neck with a flick of his wrist like he was done holding a tool.

"Go," he said.

Rowan stood there for half a second too long, chest heaving, eyes adjusting, body screaming don't go back inside even as their legs felt like rubber.

"Now," Mojave added, voice sharp again.

Rowan swallowed hard and stepped out onto the dirt, boots crunching gravel. The night air felt wrong, too open, too exposed. The generator squatted beside the house like a rusted animal, silent and dead.

Behind them, Mojave lingered in the doorway, a tall silhouette cut from shadow and moonlight, ears flicking, head tilted as he watched.

Rowan nodded once, jerky, because nodding was safer than speaking.

They walked toward the generator on shaking legs, every nerve still screaming, every thought tangled in blood and fear and the knowledge that the house behind them was darker than the night itself.

And Mojave could still see.

The generator coughed like it had something lodged in its throat.

Rowan wiped sweat and grime off their forehead with the heel of their hand, jaw clenched, knuckles scraped raw from smacking the rusted casing harder than necessary. They'd kicked it. Yelled at it. Threatened it with violence like it was Mojave's stand-in.

Finally, it sputtered.

Then caught.

The low mechanical hum vibrated through the dirt, steadying, alive again. A thin line of light flickered on along the side of the house. Rowan sagged forward, hands braced on their knees, chest heaving.

"Okay," they whispered hoarsely. "Okay. You work. You live."

They straightened, dread crawling back up their spine as the house lights blinked on through the windows. No more hiding. No more dark.

Rowan walked back inside.

The front door creaked shut behind them, and the house was bright again, warm yellow bulbs buzzing faintly, shadows retreating into corners but not disappearing. The smell hit them immediately, old wood, iron, something damp and animal beneath it all.

Mojave stood in the living room.

He hadn't moved.

He was facing the other painting this time, the same one Rowan had clocked earlier and couldn't understand. A blurry, almost offensively normal oil painting of a dog. Muted browns and golds. Soft eyes. Nothing grotesque. Nothing violent.

Just... a dog.

Mojave's posture had shifted. Shoulders relaxed. Head tilted slightly, ears angled forward, whiskers twitching as if tasting the air, claws flexing slowly against his palms.

"...Look at it," he murmured, voice low, reverent. "Carved from a higher mercy."

Rowan stopped a few steps behind him, unsure whether to breathe.

"See the eyes?" Mojave continued, tail stump giving a faint, involuntary twitch beneath the bandages at his waist. "Quiet. Knowing. No judgment. No hunger. Just... presence."

He leaned closer to the painting, nose almost brushing the canvas.

“Depths like that don’t come from innocence,” he said softly. “They come from understanding.”

Rowan frowned despite themselves, tension knotting tighter. Of all the things Mojave obsessed over.. *this* was what held him?

“What... do you need me to do?” Rowan asked.

The words came out flat. Careful. Submissive in a way that made their skin crawl.

Silence.

Then slowly, Mojave’s ears flicked back.

He turned.

Not all at once. First the head, eyes sliding to Rowan with lazy precision. Then the shoulders followed, spine rolling fluidly beneath fur and fabric until he was fully facing them.

His gaze raked over Rowan, still pale, still stiff, still reeking faintly of soap that hadn’t washed the guilt away.

Something like satisfaction curled his mouth.

“...That tone,” Mojave said. “I like that.”

Rowan swallowed.

He stepped closer, movements unhurried, predatory in their ease. He stopped just inside Rowan’s space, towering again, forcing them to look up.

Fear was still there. He could smell it. Taste it.

And he loved that too.

“You’ll learn,” he went on calmly. “Eventually. Right now it’s fear. Later it’ll be habit. After that, who knows.” His eyes narrowed, glinting. “**Conditioning takes time.**”

Rowan’s hands curled into fists at their sides. They didn’t speak.

Mojave studied them a moment longer, then exhaled through his nose like he’d reached a decision.

“I’ll tell you in the morning,” he said.

He turned away again, already dismissing them.

“Sleep on the couch.”

Rowan blinked. “The—”

“I have things to do,” Mojave interrupted, already walking toward the hallway that led deeper into the house. Toward the basement door. Toward the quiet below.

He glanced back over his shoulder, eyes catching the light just enough to gleam.

“With your new friends,” he added lightly. “You brought them all this way. Least I can do is give them my full attention.”

The basement door creaked open.

Rowan stood frozen as it shut behind him, the lock clicking softly into place.

The house hummed. The lights buzzed. And somewhere beneath their feet, something heavy shifted. Rowan slowly turned and sank onto the couch, heart pounding, staring at the ceiling.

Morning felt impossibly far away.

Sleep took Rowan like a cheap hit to the back of the skull.

They didn’t even remember curling up, just gravity winning. One second they were staring at the ceiling, listening to the house breathe around them, the next they were gone. Limbs sprawled wrong. One arm dangling off the couch. A leg half-slid toward the floor. Mouth open. Drooling a little, probably. The kind of sleep you fall into when your body finally cashes the check your mind’s been overdrawing for days.

Desert heat. Blood. Adrenaline. Guilt so heavy it had weight.

They slept hard.

And relived the day again in their nightmares.

Chapter 7: The Cornfield

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When Rowan came back to themselves, it was with a dull, splitting headache and the deeply uncomfortable realization that they were about three inches from face-planting onto the floor.

They groaned, rolling slightly, fingers curling into the couch cushion like it might betray them if they let go. Their neck screamed. Their shoulders ached like they'd been carrying God personally.

“Ugh,” they rasped, eyes still shut. “I swear to Christ—”

Then sound hit them.

Not the house's usual hum. Not the grandfather clock. Not Mojave's footsteps.

Music.

Synthetic bass pounding through the walls like a second heartbeat.

Rowan cracked one eye open. Then the other.

“...What,” they muttered flatly.

It wasn't just music. It was rave music. Full-on club nonsense. The kind that felt illegal to play in a kitchen that smelled faintly of iron and rot. They dragged themselves upright, swaying slightly, hair a mess, still wrapped in that borrowed white T-shirt. Their head throbbed with every step as they shuffled toward the noise, following it down the short hall.

The closer they got, the brighter it became.

Light spilled from the kitchen doorway in violent colors, neon pinks, acid greens, electric blues flashing in erratic pulses that would probably send you into a trip under drugs.

Rowan stepped into the doorway.

And froze.

The kitchen, normally filthy, claustrophobic, wrong, had been transformed into something unhinged. Strobe lights flashed off cracked cabinets and bloodstained counters. Shadows jerked and snapped across the walls like living things.

And in the middle of it..

Mojave.

Dancing.

Actually dancing.

It was traumatic, indeed.

Loose-limbed, fluid, violently graceful in a weird way. His movements were all sharp angles and rolling hips, spine bending in ways that looked painful for anything with bones. His digitigrade legs absorbed the beat effortlessly, claws clicking softly against the floor as he spun, arms cutting through the air with predatory precision.

His ears flicked in time with the bass. His head snapped side to side, mane catching the light. His shoulders rolled like he was made for this rhythm.

This was the same creature who had calmly supervised a massacre.

Who'd butchered bodies like art.

Who'd threatened Rowan's life with the casual certainty of gravity.

And now bro was vibing.

Rowan just stood there, half-awake, brain short-circuiting.

Of course he is, they thought dimly. *Of course this is happening.*

Mojave spun, then stopped.

Mid-movement.

His ears twitched.

He turned his head slowly, eyes locking onto Rowan in the doorway.

The music kept pounding. The lights kept flashing.

They stared at each other.

Rowan, exhausted, hollow-eyed, still carrying the phantom weight of a dead family on their shoulders.

Mojave, bathed in neon, breathing evenly, expression utterly deadpan, like as if he didn't fuck up their whole life.

After a long, deeply awkward beat, Mojave lifted one clawed hand.

Clicked a remote.

The music cut off instantly. The strobe lights died. Silence rushed in, heavy and abrupt, like the house had sucked in a breath.

Mojave's arm dropped back to his side, tail stump giving a lazy twitch.

"Oh,"

he said flatly. "Didn't see you there. Thought you were still asleep."

He tilted his head, eyes narrowing just a fraction.

"Never sneak up on me again."

Rowan opened their mouth.

Then closed it.

Their brain felt like wet static.

Mojave watched them, then snorted softly.

"You slept like a baby," he continued, strolling over to the counter and cracking open another beer like this was a normal morning ritual. "Pretty impressive for someone who butchered an entire family."

He took a long drink, eyes never leaving Rowan. "Awfully tame," he added casually, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, "for someone who was so against it." A smile tugged at his mouth. Not kind. Not wide. Just enough. "Makes you wonder.." he said, voice smooth, insidious. "Maybe you liked it more than you're letting on."

Rowan finally found their voice.

"...I danced in my room to cope with trauma once," they said slowly. "This is worse."

Mojave's ears flicked.

He grinned.

"Well, I don't cope."

The words landed flat, casual, like he'd just commented on the weather. He leaned back against the counter, beer abandoned somewhere out of frame, arms loose at his sides. The kitchen still smelled faintly of oil and dust and whatever cheap chemical sweetness the strobe lights had heated up.

"Coping," he continued, slow and disdainful, "is a weakness people dress up to feel virtuous. A distraction. A lullaby you hum so you don't have to listen to the part of yourself that's screaming."

Rowan stayed frozen in the doorway, head pounding, stomach hollow. Mojave paced once, a lazy circle, claws ticking softly against the tile.

“If something can break you,” he said, “if you have to numb yourself or dance or drink or cry about it so you don’t fall apart, then it owns you.” He glanced over, eyes sharp now. Calculating. “And anything that owns you can kill you. If you have to distract yourself so you don’t fall apart over the thing that makes you vulnerable, then you were never meant to survive it. People like *that* meant to die and rot in a ditch.”

He stopped in front of Rowan, close enough that they could smell the desert on him, hot dust and metal.

“People talk about ‘processing’ pain like it’s some delicate ritual, a little lie people tell themselves so they don’t have to admit they’re fragile.” Mojave scoffed. “Pathetic. If something hurts you that badly, you don’t cope with it. You tear it open. You rip it out. You chew it down to the bone while it’s still screaming until there’s nothing left to feel. You stare straight at it until it forgets it ever made you feel anything at all.”

A beat.

“That’s how you survive.”

Rowan swallowed. Their hands had curled into fists without them noticing.

Mojave turned away again, disinterest snapping back into place like a switch had flipped. He wandered toward the sink, gaze drifting distant for just a second too long. His tail bone flicked once behind him, stiff at the base, the motion not quite... right.

“You call it trauma,” he added, quieter now. “I call it excess.”

He glanced back over his shoulder, eyes glinting with something unreadable.

“Trim it. Or it *rots*.”

Silence filled the kitchen again, heavy and wrong, broken only by Rowan’s breathing, too human, while Mojave stood there like a man who had already chewed through every soft part of himself and decided it tasted better that way.

Rowan doesn’t say anything.

They just... stare.

Their eyes drift, slow and unwilling, down Mojave’s back, down past the sharp line of his spine, past where a tail should be.. and land on what’s left of it. The ruin of bone and scar tissue. The way it ends too abruptly, like a sentence cut off mid-word. Old damage. Intentional damage. Not an accident. Not a wound that lost a fight, one that *won*.

The headache behind Rowan’s eyes throbs harder.

Mojave notices.

His ears twitch first. Then his jaw tightens, not angry, not embarrassed. Something closer to possessive. Like Rowan just touched something sacred without permission.

“...Don’t stare,” he says lightly, though the air sharpens anyway.

Rowan swallows. Their mouth feels dry. “You said coping was weakness,” they murmur, voice hoarse from sleep and fear. “So... you didn’t cope.”

Mojave exhales through his nose. A slow, humorless huff.

“No,” he says. “I handled it.”

He turns slightly, just enough that Rowan gets a clearer view, as if daring them to look harder. The missing tail isn’t hidden. It never has been. It’s displayed, proof of devotion to his own philosophy.

“I didn’t distract myself. I didn’t cry. I didn’t rot quietly and call it healing.” His voice lowers, smooth and cruel. “I found the part of me that made me hesitate. That made me ache. And I removed it.”

Rowan’s fingers curl at their sides.

“That’s what strength looks like,” Mojave continues. “You don’t live around pain. You don’t decorate it with hobbies and noise.” A thin smile cuts across his face. “You eat it. You make it stop talking.”

Silence stretches.

Rowan finally looks back up at him, eyes unsettled, something breaking and rearranging behind them. Mojave watches that shift with interest. Like a scientist noting progress.

“Now,” he says casually, turning back toward the counter, rummaging for something to drink, “you’re awake. That’s good.”

He doesn’t look at them when he adds,

“Go wash your face. You look like you’re still dreaming.”

And somehow, that’s worse, because Rowan isn’t sure they are.

Rowan goes.

They don’t argue. They don’t ask why. Their legs just move on instinct, carrying them down the narrow hall and into the bathroom like a sleepwalker obeying gravity.

The light hums on. Too bright. Too gold.

They grip the sink and stare at their reflection. For a long second, they half-expect it to ripple. To melt. To do something that proves this is a hallucination or some bad trip stitched together by exhaustion and blood and desert heat.

But no.

Same face. Same dirt smudged under their eyes. Same faint flecks of dried brown still caught in their hairline no matter how much they scrubbed last night. Their hands shake as they turn the faucet on. Cold water splashes up, stinging, real. They cup it and splash their face once. Twice.

Still here.

“Okay,” they whisper to nobody. “Okay. This is real.”

They wipe their face with the hem of their shirt, breathing slow like they’ve been taught, like breathing has ever fixed anything, and step back into the hall.

The smell hits first.

Not rot. Not blood.

Preservatives. Sharp and chemical and wrong in a way their brain doesn’t immediately know how to categorize.

Rowan slows.

Then they reach the kitchen.

And stop.

Mojave is in the dining room now, standing beneath the hanging light like he’s setting up an art exhibit. The table has been cleared. The chairs are pushed neatly in. The wall... the wall is no longer empty.

There are frames.

"Three.

Not two.

Not one and a half. Not ‘oops I lost count.’ Three."

Mojave’s words had echoed.

Rowan’s stomach drops before their brain catches up.

Mojave turns, holding one of them up proudly.

Jane Doe’s head is mounted cleanly, carefully, her glassy eyes fixed forward in an eternal, polite calm. No mess. No violence visible. Just... presentation. Her ears are posed just so, her expression eerily peaceful, like she’s been frozen mid-conversation.

“Doesn’t she look beautiful?” Mojave asks, genuinely pleased.

Rowan doesn’t breathe.

He tilts the mount, inspecting his work. “I preserved her better than I expected. Delicate features are tricky. Takes patience.” A beat. “You’d be surprised how many people rush this part.”

Their eyes flick against their will to the rest of the wall.

John Doe.

John Jr.

All there.

Arranged by height. By family.

Rowan’s vision swims.

“Now they still get to eat with us,” Mojave continues cheerfully, stepping up onto a chair to hang Jane’s mount beside the others. “Family dinners are important. Would’ve been rude to separate them.” He pauses, considering the spacing. “Though ah... junior might complain he’s being talked over.”

He snorts at his own joke.

Rowan’s throat works. “You... did this last night?”

Mojave hops down, dusting off his hands. “Of course. Waste not.” He glances at Rowan, head tilting. “You don’t like it?”

That... that finally cracks something loose.

“I ate with them,” Rowan says quietly. “She asked if I wanted more potatoes.”

Mojave blinks.

Then smiles wider.

“Oh, see? That just makes it better.” He gestures broadly at the wall. “Context. Emotional weight. Art needs history.”

Rowan takes a step back, heel bumping the doorframe.

Mojave notices immediately.

“Careful,” he says lightly. “You’ll scuff the floor. Took me ages to get that stain out.”

He turns back to the mounts, adjusting Jane’s angle a fraction of an inch. “Besides, you’re thinking about it all wrong. This way, you won’t forget them.”

He looks over his shoulder, eyes sharp but amused.

“And isn’t that what you wanted? To remember?”

Rowan's chest tightens.

Images flash uninvited, Jane humming under her breath, John Jr swinging his legs under the table, John complaining about work. Soft, domestic, alive.

Mojave steps back to admire his work. "See?" he says. "They're still part of the household."

A pause.

"Honestly, it's kind of sweet."

Rowan stares at the wall, then at Mojave, disbelief curdling into something hollow and cold.

"You're sick," they whisper.

Mojave's ears flick.

"Oh, sweetheart," he replies calmly, "no. I'm consistent."

He finally turns fully toward Rowan, gaze pinning them in place.

"You killed them. I immortalized them. We both did our part. Don't try to have the moral high ground."

He tilts his head, studying Rowan like a specimen that hasn't decided what shape it's going to break into yet.

"And if this makes you uncomfortable," he adds mildly, "good. Means there's still something left in you to trim."

Silence swells, thick and suffocating. Mojave claps his hands once, sharp.

"Anyway," he says brightly, "I told you I'd give you your next task in the morning."

His smile widens.

"Congratulations. It's morning."

Mojave doesn't rush it.

He lets Rowan stand there marinating in the sight of the wall, the quiet presence of the family staring forever, before he finally speaks, like he's doing them a favor by changing the subject.

"Your next task," he says calmly, like he's assigning a grocery run.

Rowan stiffens.

Mojave strolls toward the back room, tail stump giving a faint, irritated twitch. "is east. Past the scrub. You'll hit the cornfield first."

Rowan's jaw tightens.

“Try not to get lost,” Mojave adds lightly. “People tend to panic in there. Corn does that.. blocks the sky, scrambles your sense of direction. Very democratic.” He walks as he talks, unhurried, paws thudding softly against the floor.

“When you make it out the other side, you’ll see a church. Can’t miss it. Bell tower, rotting wood, smells like mildew and worship.” A pause. “That’s where you’ll find your target.”

Rowan swallows. “Target.”

“The horned *Ovinomorphus*,” Mojave continues, pleased with the word. “Big thing. Revered. Worshipped, really.” He glances back, grin sharp. “Watch yourself, though. It’s not alone. Whole flock of fanatics out there. Followers. Real ‘*end is nigh*’ types.”

Rowan swallows. “*Followers*.”

“Yes.” Mojave smirks. “Religious ones are always the loudest.

He reaches the rack by the wall, fingers closing around the shotgun with practiced ease. “Oh, and don’t bother taking the wagon.”

Rowan frowns. “Why?”

Mojave checks the chamber. Click. “You’ll only be bringing back one trophy.”

That word makes Rowan’s jaw tighten.

They hesitate, then push it out anyway. “So.. just to be clear this time,” they say, voice flat, exhausted, “you’re leaving out nothing, right? Because last time you conveniently skipped the part where I wasn’t hunting animals. I was hunting... people.”

Mojave pauses.

Slowly, he tilts his head.

“But they *are* animals,” he says, genuinely puzzled.

Rowan closes their eyes and exhales through their nose. Long. Tired. “This whole thing is so wrong.”

Mojave snorts softly, like he’s amused they still think that matters. He steps closer, shotgun resting easy in his hands.

“Wrong?” he repeats. “No. It’s survival.” He lifts the gun, offering it handle-first. “You want that car battery, don’t you? Then fight for it. Or you can let the desert chew you down to bones.”

Rowan hesitates.

Mojave leans in, voice lowering. “You can rip out whatever makes you hesitate now... or you can keep clinging to those cute little human morals until they get you killed.”

Rowan reaches for the shotgun.

The second their fingers close around it, Mojave yanks them forward by the weapon, metal biting into Rowan's chest as Mojave crowds their space. His mouth is suddenly right by their ear, breath hot, voice a whisper sharpened into a blade.

"If you don't bring me that Ovinomorphus's head by nightfall," he murmurs, "I'll come take *yours*."

He lets the threat linger in the air.

Then he releases them.

Just lets go, like the threat was nothing more than a reminder, a kindness.

Rowan staggers back half a step, clutching the shotgun, heart hammering.

Mojave straightens, already bored again. "Don't take two days this time," he adds, turning away. "You had all that hesitation with the deer. I expect better now."

Rowan doesn't reply.

They turn and walk toward the door, shoulders tight, every step heavy with dread. Behind them, Mojave's voice follows, lazy and certain,

"Nightfall, bunny."

Rowan doesn't look back.

They leave Mojave's house with the shotgun held tight against their chest, knuckles white, jacket still stiff with yesterday's blood no matter how much the shower tried to lie about it. The sun is already climbing, bleaching the desert into harsh yellows and whites, like it's trying to erase what happened and failing miserably.

Every step away from the house feels borrowed.

The land stretches out flat and unforgiving, scrub crunching under their boots. The farther they walk, the quieter it gets—no wind, no insects. Just the dull thud of their own heartbeat in their ears and Mojave's voice replaying, uninvited.

Nightfall, bunny.

After a while, the cornfield rises out of the desert like a mistake.

Rows packed so tightly together they look braided. The stalks tower overhead, leaves whispering against one another even though there's barely a breeze. From the outside, it

already feels wrong.

Rowan slows.

They stop at the edge and stare.

“This is definitely a maze,” they mutter to no one, voice swallowed instantly by the corn.

They step inside.

The world narrows immediately. The Horizon is gone. Just walls of corn on all sides, tall enough to block the sun into thin, broken stripes that crawl across the dirt. The ground is uneven, littered with husks and feathers.

Chickens wander freely between the rows.

Not cooped. Not fenced. Just... there.

Some peck at the dirt. Some stand perfectly still, heads tilted, black eyes fixed on Rowan as they pass. One flaps suddenly, wings beating loud in the silence, and Rowan nearly jumps out of their skin.

“Jesus,” they hiss, clutching the shotgun tighter.

The deeper they go, the worse it gets.

The paths split and split again, identical turns branching off with no markers, no landmarks. Corn rustles somewhere just out of sight, too rhythmic to be the wind. Rowan keeps turning their head, convinced someone is walking alongside them, just behind the wall of stalks.

Watching.

They try to shake it off. Try to focus on directions. East. Mojave said east. But in here, the sun is just a rumor, and the rows twist subtly, bending perspective until left and right feel interchangeable.

A chicken scurries across the path ahead of them.

Another appears behind.

Rowan stops.

The feeling settles in fully now.

They're not alone.

The corn shifts again, closer this time. A whisper that sounds almost like breath. Rowan turns slowly, shotgun lifting a few inches, pulse hammering so hard it makes their vision swim.

Nothing.

Just.. corn.

They swallow hard and force themselves forward.

Every step feels like the maze is learning them, measuring their pace, memorizing the sound of their boots, waiting. And somewhere beyond the green walls, unseen eyes track their progress with patient interest.

Mojave didn't say the cornfield hunted back.

But standing there, hemmed in by rustling stalks and silent birds, Rowan gets the dreadful sense that it does.

Rowan keeps moving. The maze refuses to end.

Every corridor looks the same, packed dirt, snapped husks, stalks leaning inward like they're listening. When Rowan hits a dead end blocked by an old wooden fence half-rotted into the earth, they don't even hesitate anymore.

They raise the shotgun.

BOOM.

The blast tears through the wood, splinters exploding outward like brittle ribs. The sound doesn't echo so much as it dies, swallowed by the corn. Chickens shriek and scatter, feathers spiraling down slowly, mockingly calm.

Rowan coughs, ears ringing. "Sorry," they mutter automatically, then grimace at themselves. Apologizing to fences now. Great.

They step through the wreckage and keep going.

The farther in they get, the more wrong everything feels. The air is thicker here, humid in a way the desert has no right to be. Sweat crawls down Rowan's spine beneath the jacket. The smell changes too.

Something moves.

Rowan snaps their head to the left.

Nothing.

Corn. Always *corn*.

They exhale shakily. "Chickens," they whisper. "Just chickens."

A few minutes later, movement again. This time on the right. Fast. Low.

Rowan freezes, shotgun halfway raised, heart slamming so hard it hurts.

Rustling follows. Leaves brushing together. A soft, dragging sound, like hooves against dirt, but that's stupid. That's not possible. Cornfields don't have hooves. That's dumb.

They force a laugh that sounds thin even to their own ears. "You're losing it," they tell themselves. "You're tired. That's all."

They keep walking.

Another fence appears, this one taller, reinforced with wire. Old religious symbols hang from it, wooden charms, cracked beads, little hand-carved figures tied on with twine. Some of them look vaguely ovine. Horned. Watching.

Rowan doesn't look too closely.

BOOM.

The fence collapses under the blast, wire snapping back with a metallic scream. The sound feels loud this time, too loud. Somewhere deeper in the maze, something answers it. Not a scream. Not a shout.

A bell.

Distant. Hollow.

Rowan's stomach drops.

The church.

They've got the right direction.

They push forward faster now, boots crunching through debris, breath coming shallow. And still.. *movement*. Always just at the edge of vision. A shadow slipping between rows. A shape ducking out of sight the moment they turn their head.

They spin, shotgun aimed, finger tense on the trigger.

A chicken stares back at them, head cocked, unblinking.

Rowan laughs again, louder this time, a brittle sound that cracks halfway through. "Yeah. Sure. You almost got me," they mutter.

The chicken doesn't move.

It just watches as Rowan backs away slowly and keeps walking, deeper and deeper into the maze, pretending the corn isn't closing in, pretending the rustling isn't following their steps, pretending they aren't being gently, patiently herded toward something waiting at the other side.

Rowan pushes deeper.

The corn starts thinning just enough to feel intentional, paths narrowing, then widening again, like something is guiding traffic instead of chance. Their boots sink into darker soil now. Damp. Sticky.

Then they see it.

Blood.

Not splattered, dragged. A smeared, uneven trail cutting through the dirt between the stalks, dark and almost black where it's started to dry. Similar to how Rowan met Mojave. Rowan stops dead, shotgun snapping up instinctively, knuckles whitening around the grip.

Their pulse spikes.

"...Of course," they whisper hoarsely.

This is how it always starts. A trail. A sign. A choice that never really is one.

They follow it anyway.

The farther they go, the stronger the smell gets, iron-heavy, sweet in a way that makes Rowan's stomach roll. Then comes the sound.

A wet, broken gasp.

Not loud. Not dramatic. Just... persistent. Like someone trying very hard not to die and failing anyway.

Rowan's breath catches.

They move slower now, every step deliberate, dread crawling up their spine. The gasping turns into a gurgle. A choking noise, uneven and panicked, followed by a weak, involuntary twitch of sound that almost resembles a sob.

"*Fuck*," Rowan breathes.

They round the last bend and freeze.

She's there.

An anthropomorphic white bunny, collapsed in the dirt between the rows, fur matted dark red. Her upper body still twitches, chest jerking uselessly as her lungs fight for air they can't use. Her eyes are wide, glassy.. one rolling slightly as another spasm racks what's left of her.

There is no lower half.

No legs. No hips. Nothing but torn flesh and exposed organs spilling into the dirt, intestines slick and trembling with every involuntary movement. Whatever did this didn't just kill her.

It removed her.

Rowan's vision tunnels.

"Oh my god," they choke, turning away sharply, gagging as bile floods their mouth. They brace a hand against a corn stalk, shaking, breaths coming in sharp, shallow pulls.

The gasping doesn't stop.

It can't.

Rowan forces themselves to turn back.

The bunny's mouth opens again, a wet, strangled sound bubbling out. Her paw twitches weakly in the dirt, clawing at nothing. She doesn't even seem to see Rowan. Just... suffering, trapped in the last brutal minutes of a body that has already lost.

There is no saving her.

None.

Rowan swallows hard, throat burning, eyes stinging. "I'm... I'm sorry," they whisper, voice cracking. "I won't leave you like this. I promise."

They raise the shotgun with trembling hands.

For a split second, doubt flares. *Who did this? what could do this?* but it dies immediately under the sound of her next gurgled breath.

Rowan pulls the trigger.

The blast is loud, final.

Silence crashes down hard afterward, heavy and absolute. No gasping. No twitching. Just the rustle of corn and the distant cluck of chickens, absurdly normal.

Rowan lowers the gun slowly, hands shaking so badly they almost drop it. They stare at what's left of her, chest heaving, mind screaming.

"What the fuck did this?" they whisper to the empty maze.

The corn doesn't answer.

Cause that'd be.. weird if it did.

But somewhere deep within it, something moves while Rowan stands there in the dirt, realizing with sick certainty that whatever did this isn't finished hunting.

And that they are very much still inside its field.

Rowan lifts their head from the corpse.

At the far end of the path where the corn parts just enough to form a narrow corridor, there's a scarecrow.

It's crude. Straw limbs lashed to a wooden cross, burlap sack for a head, crooked hat slumped low. Old work clothes hang off it, sun-bleached and torn. One arm is raised slightly, like it's mid-gesture or caught in a lazy wave.

Rowan exhales through their nose.

"...Of course there's a scarecrow," they mutter tiredly.

They don't think much of it. Cornfields have scarecrows. This place is already wrong; one more unsettling decoration barely registers compared to the body cooling behind them.

They step past the bunny. Past the blood. Toward the scarecrow.

As they walk by, they keep their eyes forward, heart still racing, but then..

Rustle.

Loud. Close. Too heavy to be wind.

Rowan freezes.

Slowly, they turn around.

The path behind them is empty.

No scarecrow. No wooden post. No straw limbs. Just corn swaying gently, innocent as hell. Rowan stares for a long second, breath shallow.

"...Nope," they whisper.

They turn back around.

The scarecrow is *right* in front of them.

Face to face.

So close Rowan can see the stitching in the burlap, the way the fabric dips inward where eyes should be. Straw juts out unevenly at the neck, like broken bones. It looms over them, silent, unmoving.

Rowan yelps and stumbles back hard, heart slamming into their ribs. The shotgun slips from their hands and hits the dirt with a dull thud.

They don't look away.

They can't.

Seconds drag.

The scarecrow doesn't move.

Rowan backs away slowly, step by step, eyes burning, neck stiff from refusing to blink too long. Their breathing is loud in their ears, fogging their thoughts.

"Okay," they whisper shakily. "Okay, okay..."

They take another step back.

Then, panic spikes.

They turn to run.

Rustle.

Rowan whirls around.

The scarecrow is closer.

Not inches, feet. Close enough now that its shadow stretches toward Rowan's boots. The angle of its head has changed slightly, tilted as if studying them.

Understanding slams into Rowan all at once.

"...You only move when I'm not looking," they whisper.

Their mouth goes dry.

Rowan bends slowly, eyes never leaving the scarecrow, and fumbles blindly for the shotgun. Fingers scrape dirt, then metal. They hook it up, clutching it tight, still staring.

They take a step sideways.

The scarecrow stays still.

Another step.

Still nothing.

Rowan turns a corner in the maze, keeping it in sight as long as possible, then snaps their gaze forward just long enough to navigate.

Rustle.

They whip their head back.

Closer again.

Every.. time.

It doesn't rush. It doesn't lunge.

It waits.

Rowan's eyes start to ache. They blink too long once, just a fraction of a second, and when their vision clears, the scarecrow has closed the gap even more, looming now like it's breathing down their neck.

"Fuck—fuck—fuck—"

They move faster, awkwardly sidestepping through the maze, constantly checking over their shoulder, forcing themselves to remember every corner, every turn, never letting it fully out of sight for more than a heartbeat.

The corn seems tighter now. The paths narrower. Designed to make this harder. Rowan realizes, with a cold sinking dread, that the maze isn't just trapping them.

It's helping it.

And somewhere behind them, the relentless scarecrow keeps moving, one unseen step at a time.

Rowan keeps moving.

Step. Turn. Look back.

The scarecrow stands where it was last seen, never closer than it should be, never farther than it needs to be. Every time Rowan turns a corner, they snap their gaze back like their life depends on it.

Because it does.

Their neck burns. Eyes sting. They're afraid to blink too long, afraid to breathe wrong. The corn whispers constantly, brushing their jacket, scratching at their arms like it's trying to distract them.

After a while.. minutes? hours? something feels... off.

Rowan slows.

They recognize this bend in the path. The broken fence post. The same cluster of trampled corn.

"No," they mutter. "No, no—"

They turn again. Look back.

The scarecrow waits.

Rowan swears under their breath. They've been walking in circles. The maze isn't just confusing, it's resetting them, or worse, letting the scarecrow herd them like prey.

It's hard to map anything when half your brainpower is dedicated to *don't blink, don't blink, don't blink.*

Rowan wipes sweat from their brow with the back of their hand, eyes never leaving the scarecrow. "This is bullshit," they hiss. "You're cheating."

They sidestep, turn another corner,
and something slams into their face.

"GOD—!"

A familiar shriek-hiss erupts as claws rake across Rowan's cheek. The raccoon. The same *damn* raccoon. Its beady eyes are wild, mouth snapping as it clings to Rowan's jacket, scrabbling like a possessed trash goblin.

"NOT YOU AGAIN—!"

Rowan flails, trying to pry it off, stumbling backward. The raccoon screeches, claws digging in, teeth snapping inches from Rowan's nose.

For half a second, it's almost absurd. Of all the things. Of course it's the raccoon.

Then Rowan realizes,

They aren't looking at the scarecrow..

Panic detonates in their chest. They try to turn their head back,

Too late.

Something hits them from behind.

Hard.

Rowan goes down, the raccoon scattering with a furious squeal as Rowan's body slams into the dirt. The shotgun skids away. Their vision explodes into stars.

They try to push up.

Hands, well, something close to hands close around their ankle.

Rowan screams, kicking weakly, but their head is spinning, ears ringing. Their eyes flutter, blinking in and out of focus.

Through the blur, they see it.

The scarecrow.

Closer than it has ever been.

Its burlap face looms above them now, featureless and unreadable, straw shifting unnaturally beneath the fabric. It doesn't rush. Doesn't thrash.

It drags.

Rowan's body scrapes over dirt and roots as the maze slides past in broken flashes, corn, sky, shadow, corn again. Their fingers claw uselessly at the ground.

"No—stop—" they rasp, voice barely there.

Their vision dims. Brightens. Dims again.

The last thing Rowan sees before everything goes dark is the scarecrow pulling them deeper into the maze, corn swallowing the path behind them,

like Rowan was never there at all.

Darkness takes Rowan again, not the clean kind, but the heavy, suffocating kind that presses in on their chest and makes every breath feel borrowed.

Chapter End Notes

I really hope I'm portraying Mojave accurately 🙏🙏

Chapter 8: The Church

Chapter Summary

Main character experiences weird fucked up cult shit in a church.

Chapter Notes



Brief suicide, Cult Massacre, Explicit Gore, Earnest the chicken.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

When consciousness crawls back, it does so cruelly. Pain comes first. Then thirst. Then the realization that their arms won't move.

Rowan groans weakly, the sound muffled, smothered by coarse fabric scraping against their mouth and nose. Something rough rubs their cheek every time they breathe in. Burlap. Dusty. It smells like rot and sun and old grain.

Their wrists burn. Their shoulders scream.

They're hanging.

Panic spikes, sluggish but sharp, as Rowan forces their eyes open. Through a tiny tear in the burlap sack, the world bleeds in, sunlight too bright, sky too wide. Wooden beams flank their vision. Their arms are stretched out, tied, their feet barely brushing the ground.

A cross.

They've been strung up like—

No. Don't think about it..

Their throat is sandpaper-dry. Every inhale rasps. Sweat slicks their skin, soaking into the sack, making it cling tighter. They struggle weakly, ropes biting into raw skin.

Rustling.

Rowan freezes.

Their heart hammers, immediate and feral. The maze is quiet, too quiet. The scarecrow—

They force their head to tilt, peering through the tear again.

Not straw. Not burlap. Tall. Lean. Familiar. A shadow of cat ears spread across the dirt

Mojave stands beneath them, head tipped back as he looks up at Rowan like he's admiring lawn décor. The sun catches in his eyes, pupils thin slits, ears twitching once as if amused by Rowan's labored breathing.

"Well," Mojave says pleasantly, tail stump giving a faint, lazy wiggle behind him, "need a *hand*?"

He lifts one.

A human hand. Pale. Severed at the elbow. Fingers stiff, nails dirty. He wiggles it cheerfully, like a child with a puppet.

Rowan lets out a choked sound, half gasp, half sob.

Mojave grins wider. "Found it nearby. Thought it fit the theme." He lowers the hand, tilting his head. "Also—" his ears flick forward, delighted, "why are you just.. HANGING around?" A soft chuckle slips out of him, low and breathy, like he's genuinely tickled by his own joke.

Rowan's vision swims.

Mojave watches them carefully, eyes tracking every tremor, every hitch of breath. Then he sighs, dramatic, indulgent. "Alright. Alright," he says, waving a dismissive hand, the.. human hand. "Enough. It's unbecoming of you to be up there. You're not decor."

He steps closer.

Rowan flinches as Mojave reaches up, claws flashing briefly as he slices through the rope with surgical ease. One arm drops free, then the other. Rowan collapses forward, barely conscious, and Mojave catches them without effort, steadying their weight like it's nothing.

"Careful," Mojave murmurs near their ear. "You're still useful."

He lowers Rowan to the ground, crouching as he works at the sack. His fingers hook into the burlap and yank it off in one sharp motion.

Light floods Rowan's vision.

They suck in air greedily, coughing, gagging, hands clawing at their throat. Tears streak down their face unbidden, mixing with sweat and dust.

Mojave straightens, looming, looking down at Rowan with a calm, appraising stare, ears relaxed, posture loose, utterly unbothered by the state Rowan's in.

“There,” he says lightly. “Much better.” He glances back at the cross, then at Rowan again, tail stump twitching once. “See?” Mojave adds. “You wander off, get yourself tangled up in local traditions.” A pause. A smile. “Good thing you belong to me.”

Rowan stays on the ground for a long moment, palms pressed into the dirt, lungs burning like they’ve been scrubbed with sandpaper. Every breath comes shaky and loud in their own ears. Their shoulders ache where the ropes bit in. Their wrists throb. Their head swims.

They were that close.

Mojave watches them recover like he’s waiting for a kettle to boil, patient, faintly bored.

“I try to avoid that thing at all costs,” he says casually, glancing toward the corn rows like one might glance at a bad neighborhood. His ears angle back, not in fear, but irritation. “Annoying creature. No personality. No artistry.”

Rowan coughs, spits dirt, finally manages, “That—thing—”

“—doesn’t kill you quickly,” Mojave cuts in. “That’s the problem.” He squats nearby, forearms resting loosely on his knees. “It lets you wander. Hours. Sometimes days. Keeps you moving until your legs forget how. Until you’re thirsty enough to pray to things you don’t believe in.”

His eyes flick back to Rowan, sharp and intent. “Then, when you’re finally begging—really begging—for it to end,” he continues, voice almost conversational, “it hangs you up there to rot in the sun. Lets the birds take pieces. Lets you watch them do it.”

Rowan’s stomach twists.

“That,” Mojave adds, standing again, brushing imaginary dust from his hands, “was the direction your fate was headed.”

A pause.

“Had I not come looking for Earnest.”

Rowan blinks, still lightheaded. “...Earnest?”

Mojave points.

Rowan follows his finger and freezes.

A chicken struts through the corn a few yards away, pecking happily at the dirt. Around its neck is a blue collar. A name tag.

EARNEST.

Rowan just stares.

Their voice comes out flat. Disbelieving. “You... came out here for a chicken.”

Mojave smiles. Not wide. Just smug. “He wanders. Gets curious. Bad habit.” He whistles softly. The chicken clucks in response, utterly unconcerned with the horrors surrounding it.

Rowan rubs their face with both hands. “You have a pet chicken named *Earnest*.”

“Correct.”

...

Mojave adds, thoughtfully, “You should see my other chicken, though. Dumb as a rock. Ugly. Always almost getting itself killed.”

Rowan looks up slowly. Warily. “...What’s its name?”

Mojave’s eyes flick back to them, bright with amusement.

“*Rowan*.”

Silence.

Rowan doesn’t laugh. Doesn’t gasp. They just glare at him, exhausted, filthy, eyes hollow, absolutely done.

Mojave beams like he’s nailed the punchline. He shrugs, utterly pleased with himself. “..Fits.”

Then, businesslike again, he gestures toward the corn. “Nothing worth scavenging here. Anything useful rotted years ago. Head to the church.”

Rowan stiffens. “The church.”

“I’ve got the gate unlocked,” Mojave continues. “Leads straight back to my place. No need to drag yourself through this death trap again.” He bends, retrieves the shotgun from where it fell earlier, and offers it back handle first.

Rowan hesitates, then takes it. Their hands are still shaking.

“Try not to lose this one,” Mojave says lightly. “You’re running out of spare chances.”

Earnest clucks and wanders off.

Rowan exhales through their nose, shoulders sagging, dread settling deep and heavy in their gut. They don’t argue. Don’t question. They just turn and start walking toward the direction Mojave indicated.

Toward the church.

Behind them, Mojave watches, head tilted, ears forward, tail stump twitching once like a man who’s just nudged a piece exactly where he wanted it on the board.

Rowan pushes on, shotgun heavy in their hands, boots dragging through the dirt like their body's filing a formal complaint with gravity itself. Every step is irritation layered over exhaustion layered over rage. They're done being scared. Done being impressed. They just want out. Finish the maze. Finish whatever sick little tour this place insists on giving.

The corn parts around them like it's watching.

They round a corner too fast, and collide with someone.

A sharp, high-pitched scream yelps out.

Rowan jerks back instantly, heart slamming, nearly bringing the shotgun up on reflex. "Sh—!"

The scream cuts off.

"Oh—oh, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to scream," a small voice rushes out, breathless and embarrassed. "You startled me, is all. I thought you were that... thing."

Rowan freezes.

It's another white bunny.

Alive.

She's shorter, much shorter, wearing a soft pink T-shirt and worn jeans, fur a little dusty, ears trembling but not flattened in fear. She squints up at Rowan, clearly struggling to focus, and then visibly relaxes when she realizes she's not about to die.

"My name's Lila," she says gently.

Something in Rowan's chest loosens without permission. "I'm... Rowan," they reply, lowering the shotgun immediately, posture softening like a switch got flipped.

Lila lets out a shaky breath. "Thank you. I—um." She fidgets with her hands. "My sister and I were attacked by that thing. I lost my glasses when we ran. I can barely see shapes now." Her voice wobbles. "I could hear her screaming for a while before we got separated."

Rowan already knows where this is going.

"She didn't make it," Lila says quietly, swallowing hard. "I know she didn't."

Rowan hesitates, just a fraction of a second, then nods. "You're.. right. She didn't." Their voice stays steady, gentle. "I saw her. She was suffering. I... I put her down. I'm so sorry.."

Lila's eyes fill, tears spilling over her cheeks. She sniffles, pressing her wrist to her face. "At least... at least it didn't last any longer than that," she murmurs. "Thank you. For telling me the truth."

Rowan feels sick all over again.

Lila takes a breath, straightens a little. “Our mother is sick. Really sick. We were trying to cut through the cornfield to get her medication faster. We thought it would save time.” A bitter, hollow laugh slips out. “We had no idea... what this place was.”

She looks up at Rowan, eyes glossy but determined. “I still need to get back to her. I can’t lose her too.”

Rowan nods slowly. “You won’t.”

There’s a pause. Lila hesitates, then says softly, “Listen... I know I don’t know you. And I haven’t had the best luck with strangers.” She gestures vaguely at the maze around them. “But if you find my glasses while you’re traveling... could you bring them back to me?”

Her voice cracks just slightly. “If I can see, I can make my way back to her. You wouldn’t just be saving me. You’d be saving her too.”

Rowan doesn’t even think about it. Doesn’t bother to remember the consequences of promises, doesn’t think twice about how Mojave will come for them if they don’t bring the head back in time, “Yeah,” they say immediately. “I *promise*. I’ll look for them.”

Lila exhales in relief, like she’s been holding her breath for hours. “Thank you. Really.”

They part ways carefully, Lila disappearing back into the corn, guided more by hope than sight.

Rowan stands there for a moment longer, gripping the shotgun tighter. They’re exhausted. They’re angry. They’re trapped in a nightmare maze owned by a psychopath with pet chickens and a god complex.

And now they’ve made a promise.

Great.

Rowan stumbles out of the maze at last. Actually, stumbles is generous. They more or less drag themselves through the final break in the corn like a soul being spat back out of hell, lungs burning, patience dead, nerves fried beyond repair.

The air feels wrong out here. Too open. Too quiet.

Ahead, the land stretches out in sick little patches of order and decay. A church rises in the distance, its steeple jutting up like a warning finger. Nearby, a rusted water tower looms, its sides painted over with scripture and crude religious symbols, verses warped into threats. Old billboards line the road, their original ads smeared out beneath layers of fanatic graffiti: *REPENT, HE IS WATCHING*, crude halos and bleeding eyes.

Yeah. Cult vibes. Immaculate. Love that.

A narrow bridge leads straight toward the church.

As Rowan limps forward, they pass bodies, goat cultists in red robes collapsed in the dirt, some half-rotted, others disturbingly fresh. One lies slumped against a post, chest split open like something burst its way out. Thick, demonic tentacles protrude from the cavity, dried black at the ends, still faintly glossy near the base.

Rowan grimaces and steps wide around it. “Absolutely not.”

Weird, pulsing organisms throb everywhere, on the ground, clinging to buildings, embedded in wood and concrete like tumors with a heartbeat. They glow faintly, wet and alive.

Rowan does not investigate. Curiosity has been officially revoked.

They’re halfway toward the bridge when..

SHLORP.

Something slick and heavy snaps around their leg.

“What the—shit!”

Red, gore-slick tentacles erupt from the ground, coiling tight and yanking hard. Rowan’s feet fly out from under them and they slam onto their back, breath knocked clean out of their lungs. The shotgun skids out of reach, clattering in the dirt.

“Oh, you’ve gotta be—”

The tentacles tighten, dragging them toward the ground like it’s trying to swallow them whole. Rowan scrambles, clawing at the dirt, fingers stretching desperately toward the shotgun.

“Not today—NOT TODAY—”

They barely manage to hook their fingers around the grip, yank it toward them, roll onto their side, and jam the barrel down toward where the tentacles emerge from the earth.

BOOM.

The blast tears into the base of the growth. The ground spasms. The tentacles convulse violently, then go slack, collapsing like butchered ropes.

Silence.

Rowan lies there for a second, chest heaving, staring up at the sky.

“...Unbelievable.”

They kick the dead tentacles off their leg, stand, and brush themselves off with an irritated huff like this was nothing more than a mild inconvenience. They retrieve the shotgun, give the pulsing ground a long, venomous look.

“Stay. Down.”

Then, sore, filthy, and profoundly done with everything, Rowan turns and continues toward the church like this place hasn’t already tried, repeatedly.. to kill them.

Rowan reaches the church steps... and stops.

Hand tight on the shotgun. Jaw clenched. Everything in them screaming just get this over with. Finish the job. Get the head. Get the battery. Get out or die trying.

But then,

Lila’s voice crawls back into their skull. Soft. Apologetic. Trying so hard to be brave while already knowing she’d lost her sister.

You won’t just be saving me... you’ll be saving her too.

Rowan exhales slowly through their nose.

“...Damn it.”

They glance up at the sky. The light’s shifting, but the sun hasn’t dipped yet. Still time. Not much, but enough.

Enough to try.

They step back from the church doors, irritation twisting with something worse, guilt. Because whatever the hell Mojave is, whatever rules he lives by, Rowan isn’t built like that. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

And they hate that it might get them killed.

Rowan turns away from the church and scans the surrounding land. Scattered across the area are abandoned vehicles, half-buried shipping containers, tents ripped apart by wind... or claws, and the remains of people who didn’t make it far enough to matter.

Great. Lost and found, nightmare edition.

They head toward the nearest cluster first.

An overturned pickup truck, rusted to hell, doors hanging open. Rowan peers inside, nudging aside debris with the barrel of the shotgun. Old water bottles. A cracked mirror. Blood smeared across the dashboard like someone tried to wipe it away too late.

No glasses.

They move on.

A shipping container sits crooked nearby, doors ajar. Inside smells like rot and iron. Rowan steps carefully, boots crunching on something brittle, bones, probably. They scan shelves,

crates, the floor.

Then,

They spot something small near the back. Bent metal frames, lenses cracked but intact.

Rowan crouches and picks them up.

Black frames.

Too small for a human. Smudged with dirt... and blood.

Their chest tightens. "These are yours," Rowan mutters quietly, thumb brushing over the lens. They tuck the glasses safely into their pocket, standing slowly. For a brief moment, the land feels heavier. Like it's watching them make the wrong choice.

Rowan straightens, shoulders squaring. "Okay," they say to no one. "One promise kept." They turn back toward the church.

The cult land pulses faintly around them, organisms throbbing like open veins. Somewhere out there is an Ovinomorphus. Somewhere behind them is a terrified bunny trying to save her mother. And somewhere.. always.. Mojave is waiting, counting the hours until nightfall.

Rowan grips the shotgun tighter and heads forward.

No more detours.

Rowan's boots crunch softly over the dirt as they head back toward the church, every nerve still buzzing, every shadow feeling just a little too interested in them.

CRACK.

A sharp snap of wood. Rope straining. Something giving way.

Rowan freezes.

The sound came from a small shed off to the side, half-collapsed, sun-bleached boards, a crooked door barely hanging on its hinges. The kind of place that begs you not to look inside.

Rowan stares at it. "...Nope," they mutter.

But their feet don't listen.

They approach slowly, shotgun raised, pulse ticking behind their eyes. The air around the shed feels wrong, too still, too thick, like it's holding its breath.

Rowan nudges the door open.

It creaks.

Inside,

A white goat cultist hangs from the ceiling beam, red robes still swaying gently. The rope is fresh. Fibers strained. The body hasn't even settled yet, still twitching, hooves jerking faintly as the last aftershocks crawl through dead muscle.

The neck is bent at a wrong angle. The eyes are open. Still glossy.

Still there.

Rowan doesn't breathe.

They don't move. They don't scream.

Something cold slides through their chest, hollowing them out. Not fear, something worse. The quiet, creeping realization that this place doesn't even need monsters anymore.

People are doing the work for it.

After a long, silent moment, Rowan steps back.

Slowly. Carefully. They pull the door shut.

The creak sounds unbearably loud. The shed goes quiet again.

Rowan turns away and keeps walking.

Because what the hell are you supposed to do with that?

The church looms closer now, its silhouette cutting into the sky. Rowan adjusts their grip on the shotgun, jaw clenched tight, eyes forward.

No looking back.

Just get... this done.

Rowan kicks the church doors open.

The sound booms through the nave, wood slamming against stone, echoes crawling up the vaulted ceiling like startled insects.

And then,

Music.

Ritualistic. A droning chant threaded with bells and something wet and wrong underneath it, like breath being pulled through a throat full of blood. It starts the second Rowan steps inside, as if the building itself sensed them crossing the threshold.

Rowan freezes.

Pews line the room, filled.

White sheep, wrapped in red robes kneel shoulder to shoulder, heads bowed, horns pressed together, murmuring prayers that sound more like apologies than worship. Their voices overlap, desperate and exhausted, like a crowd begging the ocean to stop being the ocean.

At the far end of the church, on the podium, stands the priest.

A black ram, towering, broad-shouldered, his horns thick and spiraled like carved obsidian. His eyes glow red, not angry, not feral.. awake. Too awake. Blood stains the hem of his vestments, dark and old, soaked into the fabric like it belongs there.

Rowan steps into the aisle.

Each footstep echoes.

Shotgun held low, knuckles white, shoulders tight with a fatigue that feels bone-deep. They don't even bother aiming yet. They just walk. Down the aisle. Past the kneeling devotees.

Some of them look up.

Their eyes are hollow but hopeful.

The priest lifts his head slowly, a smile curving across his muzzle like he's been waiting for this exact moment. "Ah..." he breathes, voice smooth, reverent. "Death at last has walked through our doors."

Rowan stops a few feet from the podium.

"Wearing the face of a stranger," the ram continues, spreading his arms slightly. "My name is Hieronymus. Please, let us talk. No harm will come to you."

Rowan doesn't answer.

"We have waited," Hieronymus adds softly. "So long." Silence stretches. Then the priest begins to speak again, his voice rising, not loud, but certain. "These souls have suffered beyond measure. Not from disease. Not from war." He gestures to the kneeling congregation. "But from life itself."

The devotees bow lower.

"The endless repetition," Hieronymus continues. "Want. Fulfillment. Emptiness. Want again. Round and round it turns."

Rowan's jaw tightens.

"When," the priest asks gently, "was it all so *cruelly* designed?"

A sheep near the aisle trembles, gripping their robe.

"The serpent smiles," Hieronymus says, eyes gleaming. "Blind as it devours its own tail. But we are no longer blind."

A ripple of murmurs spreads through the church.

“Anora has woken us,” he declares. “And we have seen the truth with our own eyes.”

The chanting grows louder.

“So now,” Hieronymus says, voice breaking with reverence, “we refuse to look away.”

Rowan’s stomach drops.

“We intend to break the cycle,” the priest continues. “To *ascend*.”

The sheep lift their heads.

“Our bodies will be broken,” Hieronymus says calmly. “But our souls?”

A pause.

“*Free*.”

The devotees turn toward Rowan. Not with hatred. Not with fear. With pleading.

“Please,” one whispers.

“Free us!” another sobs.

“Can’t you see we’re suffering!?”

Rowan’s breath stutters.

What the fuck—

Hieronymus raises a hand, silencing them.

“There is,” he says, regretful, “just one problem.”

Rowan’s grip tightens on the shotgun.

“Divine irony,” the priest continues. “To ascend, we cannot kill ourselves. Nor harm one another.”

Rowan’s mind flashes,

The bodies outside. The hanging goat. The blood-soaked path to the church.

“The result,” Hieronymus says softly, “is the carnage you witnessed.” He steps closer to the edge of the podium. “A prisoner’s paradox,” he explains. “Locked in a cage. The key in your hand. Yet using it seals your damnation.”

Rowan’s pulse roars in their ears.

“But you...” Hieronymus says, eyes locking onto Rowan’s. “You are not bound as we are.”

The music swells.

“You are an outsider.”

Another step closer.

“An instrument of divine *deliverance*.”

The sheep lean forward.

“The hand that unravels the flesh,” the priest whispers, “so the soul can slip free.”

Rowan feels cold.

“How blessed you are,” Hieronymus finishes, voice trembling with awe, “to play such a holy role.”

Silence.

Then,

“What do you say?”

The realization hits Rowan like a physical blow.

They don’t want mercy.

They don’t want rescue.

They want **execution**.

Rowan stands there, shotgun heavy in their hands, surrounded by kneeling figures begging for death, a priest offering absolution through slaughter,

And all they can think is Mojave’s voice.

Rip out what makes you vulnerable.

The church waits.

Seeking Freedom.

And Rowan knows, whatever they choose next will damn them in a way even the desert hasn’t yet managed.

Rowan’s thoughts start to fracture.

The chanting swells, layer over layer, voices overlapping until they blur into noise, into pressure, into something that feels like it’s pushing directly against their skull. It’s hard to tell

where one prayer ends and another begins. Harder to tell which thoughts are even theirs anymore.

Mojave would call this weakness.

The priest's words echo, folding in on themselves.

Break the cycle.

Set us free.

You're not bound like we are.

Rowan's fingers twitch around the shotgun.

This isn't like the deer, they tell themselves.

This isn't like being tricked.

They're asking.

But that doesn't make it right.

Does it?

Rowan's mind spirals, glancing at the blood on the floor. The bodies outside. The hanging goat. Lila's sister, gasping, already gone except for pain. Jane. John, John Jr. The mercy shots. The endings that were ugly but final.

Is this mercy... or just another excuse?

And for what?

A car battery?

The absurdity nearly makes Rowan laugh. But the chanting doesn't stop. The sheep don't waver. Their eyes are bright now, wet, hopeful, worshipful.

They want this.

Rowan's breath shudders.

If ending suffering is wrong, they think, then why does it feel so much like finishing something that's already broken?

Mojave would have an answer ready.

A survivor, he'd say. That's what it makes you.

Rowan swallows hard.

Slowly, like the decision is being pried out of them rather than chosen, they lift their head and meet Hieronymus's glowing red eyes.

"I will do it," Rowan says, voice hoarse but steady enough.

"I will set your souls free."

For a heartbeat, the church is silent.

Then,

Cheers.

Not screams. Not panic.

Relief.

The devotees rise to their feet, hands clasped, tears streaming freely as if Rowan just handed them salvation itself.

Hieronymus smiles, wide, grateful. "Bless you," the priest intones. "One of us has swallowed the key as a precaution."

Rowan stiffens.

"Kill every last one of us," Hieronymus continues serenely, spreading his arms. "Search through what remains to find it."

The chanting resumes, louder now, ecstatic.

"Go on," the priest urges. "Make this a place of true worship. Let blood cleanse these pews. Let the blast of your shotgun be our final hymn."

Rowan's hands shake.

"Only through death," Hieronymus finishes softly, "will you find freedom."

Rowan raises the shotgun.

The priest does not flinch.

He steps forward instead, arms wide, eyes half lidded in bliss.

Rowan pulls the trigger.

Hieronymus' head snapped back with a sickening crack, his body crumpling to the altar floor like a rag doll, a bloom of red exploded across the altar, the force of the shotgun blast leaving a grotesque mural of blood, bone fragments, and brain matter. The priest's body twitched once, twice, before stilling, his glassy eyes staring up at the vaulted ceiling.

The devotees cry out, but not in horror.

In *praise*.

Rowan staggers, breath hitching, ears ringing. Their faces, already flushed with fervor, were now streaked with the first splashes of their leader's blood. They watched, entranced and eager, as Rowan stood there, shaking and splattered, the shotgun growing heavy in their blood-slicked hands.

They turn.

Every sheep is still there. Still kneeling. Still waiting.

Rowan's hands tremble violently now, slick, numb, barely feeling the weight of the weapon anymore. Their chest heaves as they search their faces one last time.

"Y—You... you still want this?" Rowan demands, voice cracking.

The answer is unanimous.

"Yes!"

"Please!"

"Free us!"

Something in Rowan breaks.

They pull the trigger again.

The church fills with noise, blasts and prayers cut short and replaced by silence one body at a time. At the end of the aisle, the first of the kneeling worshippers jerked backwards, his skull exploding like an overripe melon, the force of the shot flinging him into the pew behind him. His body slumped over the bench, legs twitching, a viscous pool of blood and brain matter spreading beneath him.

Rowan moves mechanically, stepping down each aisle, shotgun bucking in their hands, reloading when they have to, vision blurring as they're splashed and stained and swallowed by the aftermath of their choice.

Rowan pulled the trigger *again*.

The remaining cultists didn't scream or flee. They cheered, stamping and clapping, their eyes wild with bloodlust and religious ecstasy. Rowan could see it clearly now, the manic gleam, the rabid smiles, the utter desperation for death. They wanted this, craved it, saw it as their only path to salvation.

And *again*.

Rowan moved forward in a daze, each step leaving bloody footprints on the cold stone floor. Their chest heaved, lungs burning, heart pounding in their ears. They raised the shotgun, now slippery with blood and gore, and fired again. And again.

And.

Again.

With each shot, the scene grew more horrifically beautiful, the sickening crunch of bone giving way, the meaty thud of a body hitting the floor, the syrupy splatter of blood painting the pews a garish shade of red. Rowan's vision swam, the world through a crimson haze, the screams and chants blurring into a single, deafening roar.

Gore clings to them, blood soaking into their robes, matting their fur like a second skin. The taste of copper was overwhelming, the reek of shit and fear and death clinging to them like a shroud.

By the time the last body falls, Rowan is barely breathing, standing amidst the carnage, breathing hard, swaying slightly. Blood dripped from the barrel of the shotgun, plinking rhythmically against the stone floor. Gouts of it clung to the strap, the stock, Rowan's trembling hands. It was in their eyes, their mouth, their nose, their ears. There was no part of them that had not been baptized in the blood of these willing sacrifices.

The chanting is gone.

The church is quiet, but for the dripping of blood and the phlegmy rattle of a few last, dying breaths. The air hung thick with the stench of death and the cloying sweetness of incense, a macabre perfume that made Rowan's gorge rise.

And Rowan stands alone in the wreckage, drenched, shaking, unsure whether they've just committed an act of mercy.

A small voice at the back of their mind whispered that perhaps, in doing so, they had damned their own.

Rowan doesn't move at first.

They just stand there, knees locked, shoulders hunched, shotgun hanging uselessly from their hands while their body shakes like it hasn't gotten the memo that it's over. Every breath comes shallow and sharp, like their lungs forgot how to do this without permission. Their teeth chatter. Not from cold. From after.

The silence is wrong. Too clean. Too final.

Their ears still ring with echoes that aren't there anymore, chanting ghosts, phantom cheers, like the sound carved itself into the walls and refuses to leave.

Rowan bends forward suddenly, hands braced on their thighs, gagging dry air, trying not to retch. Their vision spots. They squeeze their eyes shut.

You just massacred an entire church.

The thought lands late, like a punch that waited until the adrenaline wore off.

A weak sound escapes them. Half a laugh. Half a sob.

It keeps going.

They straighten slowly, laughter spilling out in broken, breathless bursts that don't feel connected to anything remotely funny. It spirals, edges sharp and unhinged, until Rowan has to clamp a hand over their mouth to stop it.

"Of course," they mutter hoarsely. "Of course there's more."

The key.

The priest's voice slithers back into their head: *One of us swallowed it.*

Rowan's stomach churned as the grim realization sank in. sickening twist of fate that now demanded an even more repulsive task. They had to do this, had to defile these once living, now corpse-ridden shells to find the damned key.

Rowan looks at the bodies.

Their stomach drops.

There's no ceremony left in this part. No chanting. No meaning anyone can dress it up with. Just work. Ugly, necessary work.

With a sense of detachment that bordered on sociopathy, Rowan began to drag the first body towards the altar. The flesh was already growing cold and stiff, the limbs unnaturally heavy as they scraped across the blood-slicked floor. They left a smeared trail of crimson in their wake, the red slowly darkening to a rusty brown as it congealed. Their hands shake so badly they have to pause between motions, pressing their palms against the stone until the trembling eases enough to continue.

They don't speak.

They don't pray.

They don't apologize.

They do what has to be done.

One by one.

With the first cut, Rowan's stomach lurched violently. The knife sliced through the skin like butter, too easily for their liking. Dark blood welled up from the gash, pooling in the creases of the flesh. The stench of exposed organs hit Rowan's nose, making their eyes water and their gorge rise.

Rowan paused, breathing heavily through their mouth, before forcing themselves to push on. They had to gut these corpses like fish, had to open them up and exposing their entrails to the cold air. The key could be anywhere inside, hidden in the twisted guts of the faithful.

As Rowan dug deeper, their hands sunk into the gory mess of the body cavity. Entrails slithered through their fingers, slick and shiny with blood. The hot, pulsing blood coated their arms up to the elbows, painting their skin a garish shade of red. Rowan's stomach heaved, but they swallowed down the bile, determined to see this through.

Time stretches. Collapses. Becomes meaningless. Rowan's thoughts fracture further, drifting in and out, memories intruding where they don't belong. Lila's voice. Mojave's smirk. Jane's smile at the dinner table. The absurdity of a key being hidden this way. Rowan's clothes were drenched, the fabric heavy and thick with the weight of so much blood. Their hair was flecked with red, their face splattered, their skin painted in a macabre masterpiece of carnage. Each cut, each slice, each grim task of carving open a body was a step towards madness.

By the eighth body, Rowan's hands are numb. Their shoulders ache. Their head pounds.

And then,

Metal.

A small, dull clink against stone.

Rowan freezes.

They stare at it for a long second, not trusting their eyes. Slowly, with shaking, blood-slicked fingers, they reached into the gaping hole of the last body and fished out the key.

It was small, unassuming, stained with blood and bile. As Rowan held it up to the fading light, they could see the dark red flakes of flesh clinging to the metal, the grimy film of entrails that coated every surface. The key was a testament to the depravity they had endured, the final piece of a sickening puzzle that Rowan would carry with them for the rest of their days.

Rowan laughs again, but this time it's quieter. Hollow.

"All that," they whisper, staring at it, "for this."

Their hands close around the key tightly, knuckles whitening. The church doesn't answer. The bodies don't move. No souls rise. No revelation comes.

Just Rowan, standing alone in the aftermath, holding proof that survival isn't noble, It's just what happens when you're still breathing.

They wipe their face with the back of their sleeve, steady themselves, and turn toward the exit.

Night is coming.

And Mojave is waiting.

Rowan hefts the priest's body with a grunt, muscles screaming in protest as they sling it over their shoulder.

Hieronymus is heavier than he looks. Dead weight in the truest sense, limbs dangling wrong, robes soaked through, horns knocking softly against Rowan's back with every step. Blood smears anew across Rowan's jacket, warm turning cold, tacky against their skin.

They start down the aisle.

Each step squelches.

The church feels smaller now. Shrunk. Hollowed out. The pews are broken silhouettes against the gore-slick floor, the altar reduced to a butcher's block.

Rowan reaches the door.

Stops.

Just before the threshold, their eyes catch the candle holder.

Still lit.

The flame flickers gently, innocently, like nothing in this room has gone catastrophically wrong.

Rowan stares at it for a long moment.

No thoughts. No speeches. No justification.

Just a quiet, exhausted understanding.

This place should not exist anymore.

Without ceremony, Rowan shifts the priest's weight higher on their shoulder and reaches out with their free hand.

They shove the candle holder.

It crashes to the floor.

Fire blooms instantly, eagerly, eating up blood-soaked wood and cloth like it's been waiting for permission. Flames crawl along the pews, race up banners, devour red robes still clinging to bodies that will never rise again.

The church goes up fast.

Too fast.

Rowan stands there in the doorway, watching as the fire eats everything, faith, fanaticism, absolution, reducing it all to heat and noise and light. The seance music dies beneath the roar of flames. The stained glass begins to crack, colors warping and melting into something unrecognizable.

For a brief, terrible second, Rowan wonders if this is what the cult wanted too.

Then the thought burns away.

Rowan turns the key in the lock.

Click.

The sound is small. Final.

They step outside.

The desert air hits them like a slap, cooler, cleaner, mercifully empty of chanting. Behind them, the church roars, a pillar of fire against the darkening sky, smoke coiling upward like a signal flare to nothing and no one.

Rowan looks down at the key in their hand.

Blood-slick. Meaningless now.

They fling it aside without looking.

It vanishes into the dirt with a soft, forgettable sound.

Rowan walks on.

Each step carries them farther from the burning church, farther from the bodies, farther from the idea that any of this meant something more than survival. The priest's corpse bounces lightly against their back with every stride, Mojave's prize, Mojave's proof.

Behind Rowan, the flames rage higher, wood collapsing inward, the bell tower groaning before it finally gives way.

Rowan does not look back again.

They disappear into the dark, drenched in blood, carrying death on their shoulder,

leaving a church to burn,

and wondering, distantly, how much of themselves just went with it.

Chapter End Notes

I wonder if Mojave and Sylvester from talking kitty cat would get along or absolutely annihilate each other. Random thought.

Chapter 9: Picky Eaters

Chapter Summary

You kept your promise to Lila and deliver the horned Ovinomorphus to Mojaves place.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Rowan's boots drag through the dirt as they head back toward the cornfield, the priest's body still slung over their shoulder like a punishment that hasn't finished with them yet. Blood has dried in places, cracked and darkened, stiffening their jacket. Other patches are still wet. Warmth seeps through fabric, through fur, through skin, an intimacy Rowan didn't consent to but carries anyway.

The corn rises ahead, whispering. The maze looks calmer now, deceptively so, like it hasn't just tried to kill them.

At the entrance, a shape shifts low among the stalks.

“—Rowan?”

Lila emerges slowly, pushing corn leaves aside. Her ears perk the second she recognizes them, then freeze halfway up when she really sees them.

The blood. The body. The smell.

“Oh—” she stops herself, swallowing. “Are you... are you okay?”

Her eyes flick just once to the horned corpse on Rowan's shoulder.

“And... who is that?”

Rowan stops.

For a long moment, they just stand there, breathing. The weight on their shoulder suddenly feels unbearable. How do you compress a church full of blood, chanting, begging mouths into something that won't shatter a stranger?

How do you explain mercy that looks like slaughter?

Rowan's mouth opens, awkwardly,

“...It was,” they say finally, voice flat, scraped thin, “consensual. Cult.. people. You know...”
It sounds insane the second it leaves their mouth.

Rowan doesn't elaborate. They can't. Instead, they reach into their pocket. There's blood on the fabric. On their fingers when they pull their hand back. They notice it too late.

"Sorry," Rowan mutters automatically, already bracing for disgust.

But Lila doesn't recoil.

She stares wide eyed as Rowan opens their palm.

Her glasses.

Bent slightly. Smudged. One lens cracked at the edge.

But intact.

"Oh—oh my god," Lila breathes, stepping forward without thinking. She takes them with shaking hands, wipes them hastily on her shirt, and slips them onto her face.

She blinks.

Once. Twice.

Her breath catches.

"I can—I can see," she says softly, almost afraid to say it too loud. Then, louder, steadier, "I can actually see!" She looks up at Rowan properly now. Really looks at them.

And then she smiles.

Not big. Not manic. Just real.

"You have no idea what this means," she says, voice thick. "Thank you. You didn't just save me—you saved my mom too. I swear. You did."

Something in Rowan's chest shifts.

Not relief. Not forgiveness.

But... less weight.

Like someone reached in and loosened a knot they didn't even realize was strangling them. Forty percent, maybe. Not gone. Never gone. But lighter.

Rowan exhales, shoulders sagging despite themselves. "I'm glad," they say quietly. "Really." They glance back toward the maze, then toward the open land beyond it. "You gonna be okay getting home?" Rowan asks. "I can walk you part of the way. Make sure nothing—" they gesture vaguely, thinking of scarecrows and tentacles and hanging sheds, "—tries anything."

Lila shakes her head gently, more confident now that she can see. "I'll be alright. I know the path once I'm out of the corn. And... I think I've had enough strangers protecting me for one day."

She hesitates, then adds, softer, "But I won't forget this. I promise. Maybe we'll run into each other again some day. Life has a very funny way of doing that."

Rowan nods.

They don't trust themselves to say more.

Lila carefully steps back into the stalks with confidence now. She pauses once, turns, and gives Rowan a small, earnest wave before disappearing into the maze, alive, seeing, moving toward something that isn't death.

Rowan watches until the corn swallows her completely. Then they adjust the corpse on their shoulder, face hardening again, and turn away from the maze.

It isn't redemption. But it's something. And in a world this cruel, something is dangerously close to hope.

Rowan makes it back to Mojave's place on muscle memory alone.

The house squats there like it always does, unchanged, unimpressed, waiting. No lights on. No greeting. Mojave doesn't bother showing himself. He never needs to. The expectation hangs heavier than any welcome.

Rowan exhales through their nose.

They know the drill.

The shed door groans when they drag it open. Inside, the table waits, permanently stained. Tools laid out where Mojave always leaves them, neat in that unsettling way that says this isn't chaos. This is routine. Rowan drags the priest's body inside. It thumps onto the table, limbs slack, head lolling at an angle that feels wrong to look at. The red eyes are dull now. Empty.

Good.

Rowan just stands there for a second, hands on the table's edge, shoulders trembling.

You've done this before, they tell themselves. Jane. John. John Jr.

That knowledge does nothing to help.

They take the knife anyway.

Arms first.

The blade bites in with a resistance Rowan now recognizes too well. Their jaw tightens. Their hands shake. Every motion feels deliberate, forced, like their body is moving through thick mud. They don't look at the face. They can't.

When it's done, Rowan gathers the arms and walks to the basement door. Opens it. Tosses them down.

The sound echoes longer than it should.

Legs next.

Same process. Same hollow feeling. Same sick rhythm to it all, like the world has decided this is who Rowan is now, and nothing they do can interrupt the pattern.

Down they go.

Finally, the head.

Rowan hesitates before lifting it.

The horns curl elegantly, polished by some unconscious reverence. The fur is matted. The mouth hangs open slightly, teeth just visible. It looks smaller without the body. Less important. Less divine.

Rowan grips it under the jaw and carries it to the basement.

They lean forward..

and the eyes *snap* open.

Red.

Blazing.

The head lets out a shrill, inhuman screech, the sound tearing through the shed like metal ripping apart. Its jaw spasms, teeth clacking, horns vibrating as something inside it wakes up furious and starving.

Rowan screams.

Pure reflex. Terror punches the air out of their lungs as they recoil, almost dropping it. The thing's eyes lock onto them, knowing, accusing, alive in a way that makes Rowan's skin crawl.

“No—NO—”

Rowan hurls the head into the darkness.

It hits something hard. Bounces once. The screech cuts off abruptly.

Rowan slams the basement door shut and throws their weight against it, heart pounding so hard it hurts. They fumble for the latch, slam it down, and back away like the door might breathe.

Silence.

No movement.

No sound.

Just Rowan's ragged breathing and the faint ringing in their ears. They stand there, hands shaking, staring at the door like it might explode open at any second.

Nothing happens.

Rowan drags a hand down their face, smearing old blood across their cheek. Then, finally, the words tear out of them,

“WHAT THE FUCK?!”

The shed doesn't answer.

Somewhere in the house, unseen, Mojave is very likely smiling.

Rowan barely remembers walking in.

They shut the door behind them quietly like the house might shatter if they're too loud. The familiar rot and dust hit their nose, but it barely registers. Not after yesterday. Not after today.

Yesterday: a family of three.

Today: a cult, a church, a priest that screamed after death.

Their hands are still trembling. Dried blood cracks against their skin when they flex their fingers. Their clothes are stiff, heavy, soaked through like the massacre followed them home and decided to stay.

Their boots leave dark prints across the floor as they drift through the living room. Empty. The TV is off. No music. No strobe lights. Just the low hum of the generator and the faint creak of the house settling like it's breathing in its sleep.

The kitchen light is on.

Metal on metal. A slow, wet thud followed by a clean slice.

Rowan turns the corner.

A body bag hangs in the shower.

Dripping.

They don't stop to look closer.

Mojave stands at the counter, calmly butchering venison. His frame is lean and elongated, ribs faintly visible beneath fur and sinew, everything about him stretched and sharp. The

knife moves with practiced ease, separating muscle from bone like it's a meditative exercise. A radio hums faintly in the background, some warped tune barely holding together.

Mojave hears the footsteps.

Rowan steps in.

The floor creaks.

Mojave's ears twitch.

"Ah," he says without looking up, voice casual, mouth still full. "You're back. Hope you didn't have too much trouble with those fanatics—"

He looks up.

And stops.

The knife pauses mid cut.

Rowan stands there like something dragged out of a nightmare. Blood caked into their hair, soaked into their jacket, dried and fresh layered together until it's impossible to tell where one massacre ends and the next begins. Gore stains their hands, their sleeves, their boots. There's soot on their face. Ash in their hair. They smell like smoke and iron and fear.

It's worse than last time.

Much worse.

Mojave just... stares.

Not shocked. Not afraid.

Assessing.

The knife stops moving, suspended mid-air over the meat. The radio crackles softly, painfully loud in the silence. Blood drips from Rowan's sleeve onto the kitchen floor. *Plip. Plip.* His ears slowly angle forward. His pupils widen a fraction. One claw retracts unconsciously from the knife.

One second stretches into five.

Ten.

Rowan doesn't move. Doesn't speak. Just stands there, hollow eyed, shoulders sagging under the weight of everything they didn't leave behind.

Mojave's expression shifts, not disgust. Not concern.

Interest.

Then, slowly, his mouth curls into a grin.

He laughs.

Low at first. Then louder. A sharp, delighted bark that echoes off the walls as he leans back in his chair, wiping blood from his chin with the back of his wrist.

“...Well,” he finally says, voice low, almost impressed. “You certainly didn’t half-ass it. *Look* at you.”

Rowan doesn’t respond. They just stand there, shoulders slumped, breathing uneven, eyes unfocused like they’re still watching the basement door in their head.

He turns fully now, movements fluid and predatory, shoulders rolling as he pivots. One hind leg steps back, posture adjusting as if to better study Rowan. His tail bone sways behind him, twitching softly. He gestures vaguely with the half-eaten slab of meat. “I send you out for one head, and you come back looking like you wrestled the apocalypse and won.”

Rowan’s jaw tightens. Their hands curl into fists again, nails biting into their palms.

Mojave tilts his head, eyes gleaming. “Let me guess,” he adds lightly. “It got... *complicated*.” He chuckles to himself, utterly unfazed. “That’s alright. Complicated means memorable.”

He takes another bite of venison, chewing slowly, deliberately, never breaking eye contact. “So,” Mojave says, voice smooth and pleased, “did you bring me my prize?”

Rowan doesn’t move.

They just stand there, staring at Mojave so hard their eye starts to twitch, like their body is short-circuiting before their brain can catch up. Their chest rises and falls, sharp, uneven. Blood drips from their sleeve onto the floor. Neither of them looks at it.

For a long moment, Rowan says nothing.

Their knees buckle, not all the way, just enough to make their balance stutter like a skipped frame. One hand slaps flat against the doorframe to steady themselves. The wood comes away tacky. They stare at their palm like it doesn’t belong to them.

Their breath catches.

Then it starts coming out too fast.

“I—” Rowan tries, voice scraping raw out of their throat. It cracks immediately. They swallow hard and try again. “There was... there was so much blood.”

Mojave stills.

Not completely. He keeps chewing. But his eyes sharpen, pupils flaring wider, ears angling forward as Rowan finally.. *FINALLY* starts to unravel.

“So much,” Rowan repeats, quieter now, like saying it softer might make it less real. Their hands lift, hovering uselessly in front of them, fingers trembling. “I’ve never— I’ve never seen that much. It didn’t stop. It just— it kept coming. The floor, the walls, *me*—”

Their voice starts to shake.

They laugh suddenly. A short, broken sound that doesn’t belong to anything funny.

“It felt like hell,” they whisper. “Like I walked into hell and it shut the door behind me.”

Mojave’s grin fades, not into concern, but into something intent. Focused. He sets the venison down at last, wipes his hands slowly on a rag, never once breaking eye contact.

Rowan takes a step forward without realizing it. Then another. “I could hear them,” Rowan continues, words spilling faster now, tumbling over each other. “Praying. Cheering. Screaming. They were *happy*. They wanted it. They *begged* for it, and I—” Their breath hitches sharply. “I did it. I pulled the trigger and they just—j-just.. they.. *thanked* me.”

Their hands fly up to their head, fingers digging into their hair like they’re trying to claw the memories out. “And then—then the—the priest—” Rowan’s eyes dart wildly, unfocused, like they’re watching it again. “His head— it screamed. It *screamed*. After I cut it off. After it was supposed to be dead.”

Their voice spikes, sharp and panicked now. “His eyes lit up red and it— it *moved*—” Rowan stumbles forward another step, boots scraping the floor.

“I barely remember walking back,” they choke. “I don’t remember the road. I don’t remember opening the door. I just— I just had blood on me and fire behind me and— and—”

They break.

Their shoulders fold inward, spine curling like they’re trying to make themselves smaller. Their hands drop, hanging limp at their sides, shaking uncontrollably. Their breathing turns shallow, ragged, like every inhale hurts.

“I don’t know what I am anymore,” Rowan whispers. “I don’t know if I did the right thing. I don’t know if there *was* a right thing.”

They look up at Mojave then.

Eyes glassy. Fractured.

“What kind of person does that?” Rowan asks, voice barely there. “What kind of person kills that many people and keeps walking?”

For a moment, the kitchen is silent except for Rowan’s uneven breathing and the faint hum of the generator.

Then Mojave steps closer.

Not rushed. Not gentle.

Predatory calm.

He stops just short of Rowan, looming, head tilting slightly as he studies the way their mind is cracking open under the weight of what he put there.

“...A survivor,” he says softly.

The word lands like a verdict.

Mojave reaches out, not to comfort, but to grip Rowan’s chin between two fingers, forcing their eyes back up to his.

“You saw the truth today,” he continues, voice low. “Blood, faith, desperation—all the same thing when you peel the skin back. You didn’t fall apart in that church.”

His grin returns, slow and sharp.

“You *functioned*.”

He releases them.

Steps back.

“So,” Mojave adds casually, as if they weren’t standing in the wreckage of their sanity, “..I’ll ask again.”

His eyes flick briefly toward the hallway. Toward the shed. Toward the basement door.

“Did. You. Bring. Me. My. **Prize**?”

Rowan swallows.

Their throat works around nothing. For a second it looks like they might laugh again, that same broken sound, but it dies halfway out.

“...Yeah,” they manage.

The word is small. Ruined. Like it’s been chewed on before it leaves their mouth.

“It’s in the basement,” Rowan adds, voice flat now, hollowed out. “What’s left of him.”

Mojave’s ears twitch.

That grin sharpens, slow and satisfied, like something slotting perfectly into place.

“Good,” he says simply.

He turns back to the counter, picks up his knife again, resumes cutting the venison with calm, precise motions. As if Rowan hadn’t just walked in dripping with the aftermath of a religious

apocalypse. As if screaming goat heads and burning churches were just... errands.

Rowan stands there, swaying faintly, watching him. Something in them snaps, not loudly, not cleanly. More like a hairline fracture spreading.

“Do you even hear me?” Rowan blurts suddenly, voice cracking again. “I’m telling you I think I broke something in my head and you’re just— just—”

They gesture helplessly at the meat. The knife. The normalcy of it.

Mojave chuckles under his breath.

“I hear you,” he says. “I just don’t see the problem.”

That does it.

Rowan laughs again, louder this time, edged with hysteria. “Of course you don’t. Why would you? You live like this. You breathe this. I—” Their hand presses to their chest. “I still feel it. Every shot. Every scream. They’re still in me.”

Their knees finally give.

Not all the way. Mojave’s hand shoots out, fast, gripping Rowan by the arm before they can hit the floor. His grip is firm, claws dimpling fabric but not piercing skin.

Rowan freezes at the contact. Breathing hard. Eyes unfocused.

Mojave leans in slightly, voice dropping.

“That’s because you’re still trying to be human about it,” he murmurs. “You’re letting it sit instead of letting it settle.”

Rowan looks up at him slowly. “What does that even mean,” they whisper.

Mojave smiles, almost fond.

“It means,” he says, “you’re at the part where it hurts the most.”

He releases their arm and steps back again, giving Rowan space they don’t know what to do with.

“After this,” he continues casually, wiping the knife clean, “it gets quieter. The guilt dulls. The memories stop screaming and start whispering. And one day, you wake up and realize you slept just fine.”

Rowan’s hands clench.

“That’s not comforting.”

“It’s honest.”

Silence stretches between them.

Rowan's breath stutters.

Then it breaks.

A sound claws its way out of their chest, half laugh, half sob, raw and ugly and uncontrollable. Their shoulders start shaking before they can stop it, laughter bubbling up again in short, hysterical bursts that keep collapsing into wet, breathless crying.

"God—" they choke, dragging a hand down their face, smearing old blood with fresh tears. "This is so fucked. I—I can't—I haven't slept, I haven't eaten, I don't even know when I last drank anything—"

Their legs wobble.

The room tilts.

For a terrifying second, the floor rushes up to meet them.

Mojave is there instantly again.

"Sit," he says sharply.

Not cruel. Not gentle.

Commanding.

His hands guide Rowan backward, firm on their shoulders, steering them into a chair. He adjusts it so it's facing him directly, intentional, like positioning a subject under proper lighting.

Rowan slumps into it, head dropping forward, elbows braced on their knees, breath coming in ragged pulls. Blood smears across Mojave's fingers. Fresh. Warm.

He notices.

Mojave lifts his hand slowly, eyes flicking to the red streaking his knuckles. His tailbone gives a faint, pleased twitch behind him. Then, without breaking eye contact, he brings his fingers to his mouth and licks the blood clean.

Once.

Twice.

A low, satisfied rumble hums in his throat, almost like a purr.

"Mm," he says. "Still sharp."

Rowan looks away, jaw clenched, tears dripping off the end of their nose. "This is insane..." they mutter. "You're insane. I'm insane. I just burned down a church and now I'm—I'm

sitting at your kitchen table like it's dinner."

Mojave pulls out a chair and sits across from them.

Between them is a thick, glistening pile of raw venison. Still red. Still wet. Steam faintly rising.

Mojave folds his hands, eyes intent.

"Have you really not sensed it yet?" he asks softly.

Rowan snuffles. "Sensed what."

Mojave leans forward slightly.

"That moment," he says, voice lowering, slowing, becoming almost reverent, "when you cut into something fresh. Still warm. Still *resisting* in its own way."

Rowan's stomach twists.

"Like it isn't ready to let go," Mojave continues, eyes gleaming. "Like some part of it knows exactly what you're doing—and hates you for it."

He smiles.

"Not fear. Not pain."

Spite.

"There's a flash," Mojave murmurs, almost dreamy. "Just a flicker. A final protest. A look, a tension, a refusal. That's the moment I live for." His voice grows richer, more animated.

"That instant where you *win*. Where whatever it was.. human, animal, god, parasite—understands it lost."

Rowan's breath comes shallow now.

"That feeling," Mojave says, eyes half-lidded, "is better than anything in this world. Better than sex. Better than love. It's vindication. Proof. Control."

He taps the table once, lightly.

"Don't you *dare* tell me you haven't felt it."

...

Rowan swallows.

Their throat works. Their jaw tightens.

They stare down at their hands, hands that pulled the trigger, that held the knife, that shoved bodies onto altars and tables.

“...I did,” they whisper.

The admission slips out before they can stop it. Their laugh returns small, broken. “For a second. Just— just a second. And then I hated myself for it.”

Mojave’s smile widens.

“You hated yourself because you’re still pretending you’re above it,” he says calmly.

Rowan looks up, eyes glassy. “I didn’t do all this because I *liked* it.”

Mojave tilts his head.

“Are you sure?”

Rowan’s voice cracks. “I did it for a *CAR* battery.”

Mojave laughs, delighted.

“No,” he says. “You did it because when the world demanded something monstrous of you... you answered.” He leans in closer, eyes boring into Rowan’s.

“You could’ve walked away,” he continues. “You could’ve frozen. You could’ve broken.”

“But you didn’t.”

Rowan’s hands start shaking again.

“You felt it,” Mojave presses gently. “And part of you didn’t look away.”

Rowan’s lips tremble. “I don’t want that part,” they whisper.

Mojave’s smile softens, dangerously so.

“You don’t get to choose that,” he says. “You only get to decide whether you lie to yourself about it.”

Rowan slumps back in the chair, exhausted, empty, tears still slipping free.

The house hums around them.

The basement waits.

And Mojave watches them with quiet, terrible satisfaction, like a sculptor admiring the first visible crack in stone.

Rowan snaps.

“No—” they choke out, suddenly upright in the chair, hands slamming against the table hard enough to make the venison jiggle. “No. Don’t you *dare* make me out to be some sick, perverted fuck who gets off on this.” Their voice breaks completely now, words spilling over each other, messy and desperate.

“I didn’t *WANT* to kill anyone,” Rowan says, shaking their head violently. “I didn’t want to kill John Doe. I didn’t want to have to put a kid down—a *kid*— right in front of his fucking maniac grieving mother and then kill her too. I didn’t *WANT* to slaughter an entire cult. I didn’t want to shoot a priest who was smiling at me like I was his goddamn messiah.”

Their breath comes in harsh gasps.

“I’m doing this...” they snarl, jabbing a finger weakly toward Mojave, “for *you*. For a fucking cat who preaches death and power and philosophy while sending me out to do their dirty work for a *car battery*. That’s it. That’s the only reason. That’s the *ONLY* thing keeping me moving.”

Their voice cracks into something small and raw.

“If I didn’t need that battery... none of this would’ve happened.”

The room goes quiet.

Mojave doesn’t interrupt.

He just watches Rowan unravel, ears forward, eyes intent, like he’s listening to a favorite song.

When Rowan finally runs out of breath, slumping back into the chair, Mojave exhales a soft, amused huff.

“...Mm,” he hums. “That’s a good story.”

Rowan’s head snaps up. “What?”

“A very comforting one,” Mojave continues, calmly. “Makes it all so much easier to carry, doesn’t it?” He leans forward, elbows on the table now, claws clicking softly against the wood.

“Because committing massacres is always easier when you have someone else to blame,” he says lightly. “Life. Circumstance. **Me.**”

Rowan’s jaw tightens.

“You still chose yourself,” Mojave goes on. “Life and death stood in front of you—and every single time, you picked *you*.”

“That’s not—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Mojave cuts in smoothly. “Whether it was necessity or mercy or coercion. You still lifted the gun. You still aimed. You still pulled the trigger.”

His eyes gleam.

“Once?” he says. “That could be panic.”

“Twice?” A shrug. “Probably necessity.”

He tilts his head, smile sharpening.

“But twenty fucking times?” he murmurs. “That’s not instinct anymore. That’s commitment.”

Rowan’s breathing goes shallow.

Mojave leans back in his chair, satisfied.

“Shotgun.. huh?” he continues, eyes gleaming. “The recoil must’ve been brutal after the first few. Shoulder sore?” He mimics the motion, chuckling.

Rowan winces, barely remembering the soreness until he mentioned it.

Mojave’s voice drops, almost gentle now.

“Shotgun reloads aren’t quick, y’know,” he says softly. “You know that. You had time. Plenty of it. Time to stop. Time to think. Time to walk away.”

He taps the table again, once.

“But you didn’t.”

Silence crushes the room.

He tilts his head, ears angling outward in mock sympathy. “You must’ve enjoyed something. The control. The finality. The way it all ended because you decided it would.”

Rowan’s breath grows shallow. “No.”

Mojave’s tail stump gives a sharp, delighted flick.

“Liar,” he says gently. “Your hands didn’t stop shaking because you hated it. They stopped because you finished.” He leans back, long limbs stretching, satisfied. “You’re still here. Still breathing. Still sitting at my table.”

...

“That doesn’t happen to people who can’t *stomach* it.”

The room feels smaller. Heavier.

Rowan stares at him, eyes wide, something fractured and terrified flickering behind them.

“You survived,” he says simply. “And you survived *beautifully*.”

Rowan’s hands curl into fists so tight their knuckles ache. For the first time since they walked through the door, the thought creeps in slow, like a poisonous whisper, undeniable,

What if Mojave isn’t wrong?

And that thought terrifies them more than any screaming head in the basement ever could.

Mojave’s eyes drag over Rowan again, slow, unapologetic, like he’s studying a canvas he’s waited years to see finished.

“I mean—*fuck*,” he breathes, a little too hard, a little too pleased. “Look at *you*.”

Rowan flinches.

The blood is drying now, flaking where it’s thickest, darker where it soaked into seams and folds. It makes them look heavier somehow. Changed. Like the violence didn’t just pass through them, it *stuck*.

Mojave leans closer without touching, pupils blown wide.

“It gets better every time,” he says, almost to himself. “The first night you came back, it was messy. Panicked. Ugly.” A grin tugs at his mouth. “Now? This is... layered.”

Rowan’s stomach turns.

Mojave seems to realize he’s leaning too far in, too hungry. He straightens abruptly, clears his throat, forces his shoulders to relax like someone pretending they didn’t just say something unhinged.

“Ahem. Anyway,” he says, too casually. “You must’ve slaughtered *so* many.”

Rowan’s voice is barely above a whisper. “Mojave. Don’t.”

But Mojave is already gone again, eyes unfocused, drifting somewhere else entirely. “I just keep picturing it,” he continues, voice rich, almost dreamy. “That sound right after. You know the one. That wet, bubbling gurgle when the lungs are still trying to work through holes that shouldn’t exist anymore.”

Rowan clamps their hands over their ears.

“Stop..”

“How the room must’ve smelled,” Mojave presses on, unbothered. “Gunpowder and iron and shit and incense burning underneath it all. Like trying to pray inside a slaughterhouse.”

“*Stop*,” Rowan snaps louder, hands shaking.

Mojave smiles wider.

“And the floors—oh, the *floors*,” he goes on, voice warming. “So slick you can’t tell if you’re stepping on blood or brain or bits of something that used to have a name. Boots sticking. Sliding. Every step a gamble.”

“I said stop!”

Mojave doesn’t.

“How you probably had to brace yourself against the pews,” he says softly, reverently. “Hands slipping. Weapon bucking. Bodies falling wrong.. never the way you expect. They never just *drop*, do they? There’s always that after death little spasm. It’s so.. *satisfying*. Did any of them hesitate at the last second?” His tongue drags slowly across his teeth. “I love that part. When faith and fear finally meet.”

Rowan’s breath turns ragged. Their vision swims. The kitchen tilts. “S.. Stop—stop asking like.. it’s—like it turns you on.”

Mojave laughs. A low, breathy sound. “Oh, I wouldn’t *cheapen* it like that.”

Rowan’s fingers curl into the fabric of their pants.

“Please,” they choke. “I can’t—”

Mojave finally pauses.

Not because Rowan asked.

Because he’s savoring the look on their face.

There’s a beat of silence, oppressive.

Then Mojave exhales, slow and satisfied, and leans back in his chair again.

“...You don’t have to remember it all at once,” he says mildly. “It’ll come back on its own.”

Rowan sinks back into the chair, shaking violently now, hands pressed to their temples like they’re trying to hold their skull together.

Mojave watches them unravel with quiet fascination. “Don’t worry,” he adds, almost kindly. “You’ll get used to it.”

Rowan’s brow twitches upward when Mojave says it.. *you’ll get used to it*.. and for a split second, something sharp cuts through the fog.

They’d thought this was the end of it.

They’d thought the cult was the price. The family. The church. The fire. The blood.

The *battery*.

Rowan swallows, throat dry. “What... What do you mean..?” they ask quietly.

For a split second, it feels like Mojave might answer.

But he doesn't.

Instead, he turns back to the counter, nudging the pile of meat with the flat of his knife like it's a presentation. His tone shifts, falsely domestic.

"Enough talk for now. This meat ain't gonna eat itself." A pause. Then, almost teasing, "So what do you say? You hungry?"

Rowan's stomach betrays them with a loud, aching growl.

Mojave's grin sharpens. "Thought so."

He lifts the slab just enough for Rowan to see it properly.

"I think you'd recognize this taste real well."

Jane.

The realization hits like a fist to the gut.

Rowan goes still.

Their stomach aches from starvation. They haven't eaten. They haven't drank. Their body is screaming for fuel. But their mind slams the brakes so hard it almost hurts.

Jane. Jane kneeling at the table. Jane's voice. Jane's hands. Jane crying over her son. Jane alive long enough to look at Rowan and realize what was about to happen.

Even if Mojave wants to reduce her to venison, even if he wants to pretend it's just meat...

Rowan can't.

Their stomach twists violently, not with hunger, but with nausea.

"Yes," Rowan whispers, hoarse. "I'm *starving*."

Mojave's ears flick.

Their jaw tightens. "But...I'm *not* eating that."

....

Silence drops like a blade.

The radio crackles faintly. Somewhere in the house, something creaks, or dies. The meat on the counter gleams wetly under the light.

Mojave doesn't look at Rowan at first.

But then..

He straightens slowly.

Too slowly.

He rolls his neck back once, joints popping softly. Drops his shoulders. His gaze drifts down to the venison like it was supposed to be a gift, an offering, and Rowan just spat on it, losing all the meaning and thought Mojave put into it.

Not anger. Not yet.

Disappointment.

Deep. Cold.

All that blood..

All that conditioning..

And still... *resistance.*

“.....You know,”

Mojave says after a few seconds, voice low, almost hurt, or tired,

“it’s rude to reject food when a host offers.”

...

Rowan’s heart pounds loud enough they swear Mojave can hear it, their hands curl into fists. They knew better than to piss Mojave off. It was suicide. But seeing Janes flesh offered to them like some god damn dessert momentarily made them forget.

“So is making your guest do all your bullshit for you,” Rowan snaps back, bitter, exhausted, reckless. “And then pretending it’s a favor.”

...

Then,

Mojave lets out a small, breathy chuckle.

Not amused.

Indulgent.

“...Fine,” he says softly. “Here.”

It happens fast.

Too fast.

Rowan barely has time to register the word before Mojave lunges.

A hand fists in Rowan's hair, yanking their head back hard enough to make stars burst behind their eyes. The chair screeches as Rowan stumbles, barely catching themselves before Mojave shoves them down into it again.

"HEY—!"

Mojave doesn't let go.

With his free hand, he grabs a fistful of slick cold raw meat, and rams it into Rowan's mouth.

"I'll help you out then!" he says maniacally. "Sometimes picky eaters just need a little push!"

Rowan jerks their head, gagging as raw flesh presses past their lips. The taste hits instantly. Their throat convulses around raw fat rotting past their tongue, metallic, cold.

"No—!" They cough, choking, trying to spit it out.

Mojave jams his fingers harder against their jaw, forcing it open wider.

"Easy..." he croons. "Nice and easy now...."

Rowan retches, bile burning up their throat as meat slides against their tongue. They try to bite down on anything, but Mojave shoves again, pushing it deeper, his other arm bracing Rowan's chest as he forces them back.

The chair tips.

Rowan hits the floor hard, the impact knocking the breath from their lungs. Mojave follows them down immediately, knee pinning against their shoulder, weight crushing, unrelenting.

"Stop—please—!" Rowan gurgles, tears streaming as they choke, throat spasming around something that refuses to go down.

Mojave presses his forearm across their forehead, leaning in close enough that Rowan can smell blood on his breath.

"Theerree you go," he murmurs. "That's it.. *Swallow*."

Rowan claws at his arm, weak, shaking, vision blurring. Their body betrays them, reflex taking over as their throat tightens and pulls the meat down in a wet, painful gulp.

They gag again. Almost vomit.

Mojave doesn't let them.

"*No. Swallow* it down." he says commandingly. "*Swallow Jane*."

Another shove. Another forced swallow. Tears streak down Rowan's face, saliva and blood smearing their chin as they choke it down, every muscle screaming to reject it.

"Remember the taste.." Mojave whispers, almost tender. "Make it last..."

Rowan lets out broken sobs openly now, exhausted, pinned beneath him, lungs burning, stomach roiling, their body forced into obedience while their mind splinters further apart.

Something inside Rowan finally gives, not snapping cleanly, but tearing, wet and painful, like tissue stretched past its limit.

They choke.

They swallow.

And the kitchen is very quiet except for Rowan's broken, desperate breathing and Mojave's satisfied, steady hum as if he's finally corrected something that was out of place.

Mojave finally eases his weight off them.

Not gently. Just... done.

The pressure lifts from Rowan's chest all at once, and they suck in air like they've been underwater too long. Their body folds in on itself the second he releases them, curling instinctively, knees dragging up, hands scrabbling uselessly at the floor.

They gag.

Hard.

They shove at Mojave's leg with what little strength they have left, more reflex than resistance, and he allows it, not because it matters, but because he's already finished.

Rowan rolls onto their side, then onto hands and knees, coughing violently. Spit strings from their mouth. Their throat burns. Their stomach heaves in warning spasms that come too fast to stop.

They retch once.

Twice.

Then everything comes back up.

They vomit onto the kitchen floor in wet, choking waves, hucking up bile and half chewed meat, tears dropping and mixing with it. Their shoulders shake so hard their arms almost give out, palms slipping on the floor. They gag again, dry this time, throat spasming around nothing, chest heaving.

Air won't come right.

They're trembling head to toe, breath coming in broken pulls, vision swimming as they cough and retch and cough again.

Behind them, Mojave just watches.

For a moment.

Not concerned. Not angry. Just Annoyed. Like the mess on the floor is an inconvenience. Like the vomiting is a failure of a follow through.

"*Tch*," he clicks softly under his tongue.

He reaches for the knife again, fingers closing around the handle with the same calm precision as before. The sound of metal scraping against the counter is loud in Rowan's ears, too loud.

Mojave steps over Rowan's shaking body without hesitation, careful not to step in anything. He pauses only long enough to wipe his hands again, slow and methodical, like he's resetting after a minor interruption.

"Wasteful," he mutters, not even looking at them.

Rowan tries to say something, anything, but it comes out as another hoarse cough. Their arms give out and they slump forward, forehead nearly touching the floor, breath shuddering, stomach still twisting violently.

Mojave doesn't help.

He doesn't speak again.

The back door opens. Cool air rushes in, sharp and brief.

Then it closes.

Footsteps recede.

And Rowan is left alone.

They stay there on the kitchen floor, curled and shaking, throat raw, stomach empty and burning, the smell of blood and vomit and iron pressing in from every direction. Their breathing slows eventually, not because they calm down, but because they're too exhausted to keep panicking.

Their vision blurs.

The room tilts.

The last thing they register is the cold floor against their cheek, and then everything goes dark.

Chapter End Notes

I almost forgot to release this chapter because I was so tired and overslept grr.

I'm gonna be releasing some fanart soon of the characters from the game, just a special edition version of this fanfic. It's gonna be Semi realistic? I've never drawn animal anthropomorphic characters before, so I'm using the Beastars artsyle as inspiration. I've never seen the show before. That's never really been my thing before. But it'll be a mix between that and semi realism. It's still a work in progress.

They'll be uploaded here and on my Instagram when they're ready.

Chapter 10: Your guilt Does Not Purify You

Chapter Summary

Main character has had enough of Mojaves bs

Chapter Notes



Drowning

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Rowan doesn't remember when their body finally gives up.

Just that the kitchen floor is cold against their cheek. That their stomach keeps clenching on nothing, dry-heaving until there's no strength left to gag. That their limbs feel hollowed out, like someone scooped them clean and forgot to put the soul back in.

They don't dream.

They just... disappear for a while.

Time stretches weird when you're empty. Empty stomach. Empty blood sugar. Empty will. They slaughtered an entire church on nothing but adrenaline. Fought through fields and monsters and terror with a body that should've quit hours ago. Even helped a rabbit, Lila, Lila the rabbit with gentle hands a soft voice, a moment of something almost kind, something that almost gave Rowan a hope of optimism.

Vomiting half chewed meat on an empty stomach hurts worse than any blade ever did.

At some point, their breathing evens out. At some point, the shaking stops.

And then,

"Wakey wakey..."

The voice slithers into their head, light, sing-song, wrong.

Rowan flinches awake with a sharp, panicked inhale, throat burning like they swallowed acid. Every muscle screams as they try to move. Their clothes are stiff with dried blood.

Someone else's. Some of it theirs. There's vomit crusted on their sleeve, on their collarbone.

They feel disgusting. Weak. Dizzy.

Mojave stands in the doorway.

Relaxed. Casual, as if he didn't choke them with raw meat...

Rowan blinks up at him, vision swimming. Their head pounds. Their tongue feels swollen and raw. For a second, they think they might pass out again.

Mojave tilts his head. Smiles.

"While you were out," he says pleasantly, "I figured I'd bring you a surprise."

Rowan swallows. It hurts.

"Follow me."

Rowan tries to speak. Their mouth opens. Nothing comes out but a rasp. But Mojave turns anyway, already walking, already assuming obedience.

Rowan drags themselves after him.

Hands scrape the floor. Knees barely cooperate. They use the wall like a drunk uses lampposts, clinging, breathing through waves of nausea and static. Their vision tunnels. Their heart thuds wrong, too fast. Every step feels.. earned.

They pass the dining room.

Then the corner of the kitchen.

Then,

They see her.

Lila.

Pinned to the living room wall like decoration.

Displayed.

A knife through her stomach, sunk deep enough that the handle rests against her fur. Another through her hand, splayed uselessly beside her head. A third driven into her thigh, angling her body so she hangs wrong, twisted, held up by pain and steel.

Her abdomen is torn open around the blade. Dark, wet shapes spill forward, glistening, trembling with every shallow breath she takes. Blood mats her fur, dripping in slow, sticky lines down the wall, pooling beneath her feet.

She's still alive.

Her glossy eyes flick toward Rowan the second they make a sound, going wide, unfocused with shock. Her mouth opens and closes, but all that comes out are sharp, wet gasps and a horrible gurgling wheeze, like her lungs are filling with something they can't handle.

Rowan's world snaps violently back into focus.

"NO—" Their voice cracks as they lunge forward, forgetting their weakness, hands shaking as they reach for her and stop short, terrified of making it worse. "LILA—oh my.. oh my god! I'm here, I'm here—"

They don't know where to touch. Don't know what to fix first. There's too much wrong. Too much hurt.

She's suffering.

Just like John Jr.

Rowan's breath turns ragged. "Why—" They choke, turning on Mojave, eyes blazing through tears. "Why THE FUCK would you do this?! She didn't.. SHE didn't do ANYTHING. Her mother was DYING. She was just—she was just trying to help—"

"I saw you two earlier," Mojave says calmly, almost fond. "Talking in the corn." He steps closer, hands dangling by his side, admiring his work like decor.

"And I thought... *huh*. They like her."

Rowan's fists clench. Their whole body shakes with fury and fear and helplessness. "You sick—what is wrong with you?!"

Mojave shrugs.

"Attachment," he says, like he's explaining a basic concept to a child, "is weakness." He gestures vaguely toward Lila. "All our stories end the same way," he continues. "Illness. Accidents. Time. Me. You. Doesn't matter. Death's the punchline every single time." He gestures lazily toward Lila's ruined body.

Lila gasps again, a wet, broken sound that makes Rowan sob.

"So I figured.. why wait?" Mojave continues, "Might as well spare her the suspense."

Rowan turns back to her, hands hovering uselessly, tears spilling freely now. "I'm so sorry," they whisper desperately. "I'm so sorry, I don't know—"

Mojave's voice cuts through it, sharp and final.

"So," he says. "Your choice."

He taps the handle of a knife still embedded in the wall.

"End it now."

A pause.

“Or let her suffer a little longer.”

Another pause. Colder.

“Either way? She makes a fine trophy right where she is.”

The room feels smaller. The air feels poisoned. And Rowan realizes, horrifyingly, that this isn't about Lila at all. It's about breaking the last soft thing left inside them.

Time stretches weird when you're empty.

Empty stomach.

Empty blood sugar.

Empty will.

Rowan's knees threaten to buckle as the realization settles in, not just what Mojave has done, but why. A memory crawls up through the static in their head, cold and sharp.

His tail.

The way he'd said it so casually, like a lesson learned young and learned well. How he'd torn it off himself. How he'd eaten it.

Because it made him soft. Because it made him vulnerable.

Because it was something someone else could grab.

Rowan's breath stutters.

This isn't about punishment.

It's about *removal*.

Mojave isn't just hurting Lila. He's trying to carve something out of Rowan.

Their hands curl into fists so tight their nails bite skin. Their whole body trembles, shaking hard enough it rattles their teeth. “You're trying to do it to me,” Rowan whispers hoarsely.

Mojave's ears twitch.

They lift their head, eyes blazing through tears, panic and rage twisting together until they're indistinguishable. “You sick fuck,” they spit. “You want me empty. You want me like you.”

Mojave smiles wider.

“Oh,” he says softly, pleased. “You are learning.”

Rowan's breathing goes wrong, too fast, too shallow. Their chest feels like it's collapsing inward. The room tilts. The walls feel too close, the ceiling too low. Their heart hammers like it's trying to escape. "I can't—" Rowan gasps, clutching at their own shirt. "I can't—I don't—" A panic attack crashes over them full force. Their hands shake violently. Their vision blurs. Tears streak down their face unchecked.

Lila makes another sound. A wet, gurgling choke that bubbles out of her throat.

Rowan flinches like they've been struck.

Mojave steps closer.

He looks at Lila with open interest now, head tilted, eyes tracking the rise and fall of her ruined chest.

"Look at her," he murmurs. "See how she's still trying? Even with all that... mess spilling out." He gestures casually toward her abdomen. "Bodies are funny like that. They cling. They beg."

Rowan shakes their head violently. "Stop. Please—stop—"

"She screamed the whole way," Mojave continues, conversational. "Didn't stop once. Kicked. Scratched. Bit me." A faint chuckle. "You'd think someone that small would know when it's pointless."

Rowan lets out a broken sob.

"She didn't die right away," he adds, almost thoughtfully. "Takes longer than you'd expect. Especially when you're careful not to hit anything important."

Lila's eyes roll weakly toward Rowan again. Another sharp gasp tears out of her, followed by a bubbling wheeze.

Rowan clamps a hand over their mouth, choking on a sound halfway between a scream and a sob.

"This is your fault," Mojave says gently.

Rowan snaps their head up. "NO—"

"You resisted," he continues, unbothered. "You pushed back. You rejected what I offered you. You rejected me." His voice tightens, just a fraction. "You chose this instead."

He gestures sharply at Lila.

"You chose softness," he says. "You chose her. Over the raw, honest beauty of carnage. You chose her over me."

Something ugly coils beneath his tone, not quite jealousy, not quite anger. Possession twisted into doctrine. "You don't get to keep both," Mojave finishes. "You don't get to be kind and

still survive.”

Rowan’s body shakes harder.

They look at Lila.

Her chest barely moves now. Blood drips steadily, pattering softly against the floor. Her mouth opens in a silent, desperate shape, lungs failing her inch by inch.

She’s dying.

And Mojave will let her.

Rowan’s vision tunnels.

They can’t breathe.

They can’t think.

They can’t listen to him anymore.

Something inside them snaps, not clean, not agreement, but something final.

Rowan steps forward.

Mojave’s smile sharpens.

They grab the knife. The one through Lila’s hand. It’s warm, soaked into her blood. Their grip is clumsy, shaking so badly they nearly drop it. Lila’s eyes widen in panic, her body jerking weakly as Rowan pulls the blade free from the wall.

“I’m sorry,” Rowan sobs, pressing their forehead briefly to hers. “I’m so, so sorry.”

They don’t let themselves hesitate.

They do it fast. One decisive motion.

Lila’s body goes slack almost instantly. The gasping stops, the gurgling dies with it.

Silence crashes into the room, heavy and suffocating.

Rowan stands there shaking, knife slick in their hand, tears dripping onto the floor as their stomach twists violently and their heart feels like it’s been torn open and hollowed out.

Behind them,

Mojave exhales in satisfaction.

There it is.

The sound of something precious being cut away.

Rowan doesn't move right away. They stand there with their forehead pressed against the wall beside Lila's body, breath hitching, shoulders trembling so hard it looks like they might shatter apart. The knife is clenched white-knuckled in their fist, slick with blood that's already starting to cool.

Their stomach cramps again, empty and furious. Their throat burns. Their eyes sting so badly it feels like they're bleeding tears.

Behind them, Mojave speaks.

Sounding pleased.

"That's it," he says softly. "Feel that?"

Rowan's teeth grit.

"That hollow ache?" Mojave continues. "That's something important dying. Something useless. Something that gets you killed."

Rowan lets out a broken, strangled sound.

"It was time," Mojave goes on. "You've been dragging those soft pieces around like dead weight. Sympathy. Attachment. Mercy." A dismissive scoff. "Prey instincts."

Rowan's grip tightens around the knife until their hand aches.

"Maybe next time," Mojave adds lightly, "you'll think twice before getting sentimental with something meant to be eaten."

Rowan's breath stutters.

Mojave takes a step closer. "Now," he says, tone shifting, businesslike, "let's talk about what's next. I think you'll enjoy your next—"

The world snaps.

Rowan pivots violently, a raw, animal sound tearing out of their chest as they swing. The knife arcs fast, desperate, aimed straight for Mojave's throat.

For a split second, just one, it feels possible..

Then Mojave is gone.

A blur of motion. A flick of muscle and instinct. He slips backward like smoke, the blade slicing empty air where his neck was a heartbeat ago.

The knife whistles uselessly past him.

...

Rowan freezes mid-stance, chest heaving, eyes wild, tears streaking down their face as adrenaline floods their veins. Their body settles into a fighting crouch without conscious thought, knees bent, shoulders squared, blade raised again.

Mojave stares at them.

Then his eyes widen.

Not in fear.

In delight.

“...*Oh*,” he breathes.

Then he throws his head back and laughs, loud, sharp, unhinged.

“LOOK at you!” he crows, clapping once. “You finally found your spine!”

Rowan snarls. “I’ll *kill* you.”

Mojave steps forward instead of back. “You?” he taunts. “After slaughtering a whole family? A cult? You think that gave you the confidence to swing at me?” His grin stretches too wide. “The one who taught you how to survive in the first place?”

Rowan lunges again.

This time Mojave catches their wrist mid-swing. The impact jars Rowan’s arm to the shoulder.

Mojave twists hard. “*God*,” Mojave laughs, eyes bright. “I love this part..”

Rowan swings with their other fist. Mojave ducks it effortlessly, shoving Rowan back into bathroom, slamming them against the sink. Porcelain cracks. The mirror rattles violently as Rowan’s head smacks into it, stars exploding behind their eyes.

“Don’t you see?” Mojave says breathlessly. “Cutting her off—cutting that out of you—look what it unlocked!”

Rowan spits blood and charges. They slam into Mojave with everything they have, driving him back a step, one step, before Mojave grabs Rowan by the collar and hurls them sideways.

Rowan hits the wall hard, ribs screaming.

“You’re dangerous now,” Mojave continues, grabbing Rowan by the hair and slamming their head into the mirror again. *CRACK*. Glass fractures outward. “You have nothing left to lose.”

He slams again.

CRACK

“Because of ME.”

He slams their head into the broken mirror again, causing Rowan to groan out in pain, but they still haven't lost their fight, despite how futile their strength is against Mojaves.

Rowan bites him.

Hard.

Teeth sink into flesh.

Hot metallic Blood floods their mouth.

Mojave hisses, jerking back, and then starts laughing harder.

“Yes!” he snarls, wiping blood from his jaw. “THAT’S it! Hurt me!”

Rowan slashes at him again, managing to nick his shoulder. A thin line of red blooms.

Mojave looks down at it.

Then back at Rowan.

His smile turns feral.

“Oh, don’t worry,” he says softly. “I’ll let you try.”

He grabs Rowan by the throat and lifts them clean off the ground.

Their feet kick uselessly.

“You forget one thing,” Mojave murmurs, leaning close. “I’m still the main character.” He throws Rowan across the room like they weigh nothing.

Rowan crashes into the bathtub, which was filled with water and blood from from the hanging body bag, spine slamming into porcelain. Water sloshes violently over the rim. They barely have time to gasp before Mojave is on them again.

He shoves Rowan down into the tub, hands crushing their shoulders, forcing their head under the water.

Cold explodes around them.

Rowan thrashes, lungs screaming, hands clawing uselessly at Mojave’s arms. Water spills everywhere, soaking the floor, splashing the walls.

Mojave leans his weight in, calm as ever.

“You know how easy this would be?” he says conversationally over the sound of splashing. “Little pressure *here*.. Little twist *there*... Neck snaps like *wet* twigs.”

Rowan’s vision blurs. Their chest burns.

They fight harder.

Mojave chuckles.

“But where’s the fun in THAT, ROWAN?” he adds.

Rowan’s knee connects with his side. Mojave grunts, but doesn’t let go.

They’re drowning.

And Mojave is *smiling*.

Mojave hauls Rowan’s head back up by the hair.

Water pours off their face in sheets. Rowan sucks in a ragged, animal gasp, lungs screaming, throat raw, coughing so hard it feels like something tears inside their chest. Their vision whites out at the edges. Blood and water drip from their nose, their mouth, streak down their chin.

Mojave keeps his grip tight, forcing Rowan to look at him.

“Feel that..?” he asks softly.

Rowan can barely hear him over the roar in their ears.

“Answer me,” Mojave presses, eyes locked, unblinking. “Do you feel how close that was?”

Rowan coughs, spits water, chokes. “*F—fuck you—*”

Mojave smiles wider.

“Good,” he murmurs. “You’re still here.”

His thumb presses under Rowan’s jaw, tilting their head back just enough to expose their throat.

“Did it go quiet for a second?” he asks, curious now. “That little narrowing? That moment where your body starts making decisions without you?”

Rowan shakes, muscles trembling violently, hands scrabbling uselessly at Mojave’s wrists.

“Can you feel your life pulling away?” Mojave continues, voice almost reverent. “Just a little. Like a tide.”

Rowan’s breath stutters.

And then Mojave shoves their head back under. Water closes over them again, loud and suffocating. Rowan thrashes harder this time, panic detonating in their chest. Their hands slam against the tub, against Mojave’s arms, nails scraping skin. Their legs kick wildly, sloshing water over the rim, soaking the floor.

The water starts to cloud.

Red blooms outward from Rowan's cuts, thin at first, then darker as blood washes free from their hairline, their split lip, the scrapes along their ribs. It coils through the water like smoke.

Mojave watches it with interest.

"You know why I lived?" his voice carries, distorted but clear enough through the water.

"Why I'm still standing?"

Rowan's lungs burn. Their vision flickers.

"Because I learned early," Mojave continues calmly, "that the world doesn't reward innocence. It eats it."

Rowan's body convulses as they try to inhale and fail.

"People like you," Mojave says, leaning closer, pressing Rowan deeper, "die fast. Because you hesitate. Because you mourn. Because you think feeling makes you better."

The tub rattles as Rowan bucks desperately.

"I survived because I didn't cling to that lie," Mojave goes on. "I tore it out. Piece by piece."

Rowan's chest spasms violently.

"And you?" Mojave murmurs. "You keep trying to hold onto it like it's holy."

He yanks Rowan up again.

Rowan explodes into breath, gasping, choking, sobbing, retching water and blood all over themselves. Their head lolls uselessly for half a second before Mojave forces it upright again.

"Still with me," Mojave observes. "Barely."

Rowan's eyes are glassy. Tears mix with blood. Their body shakes uncontrollably.

"I'm going to take your *innocence* from you," Mojave says, voice low, deliberate. "Not all at once."

Rowan whimpers despite themselves.

"I'll grind it down," he continues. "Every time you think you've lost it, I'll show you there was more to strip away."

Mojave pushes their head halfway back under the water, just enough to make Rowan panic.

"Again," he says. "And *again*. And **again**."

Rowan's hands clutch at his arms, weak now.

“I’ll baptize you in what you are,” Mojave whispers. “In your blood. In your choices. Until you stop pretending you’re different from me.”

Rowan shakes their head frantically, sobbing, throat raw. “Please—”

Mojave doesn’t let them finish.

He forces Rowan under again, harder this time.

Water floods their ears. The world narrows to pressure and pain and the screaming demand to breathe. Red swirls thicker now, turning the bath into something obscene and living.

Mojave holds them there, steady, unshaking.

“This is mercy,” he says coldly. “Because when you finally understand?”

Rowan’s body jerks violently, a full-body convulsion.

“You’ll stop breaking like this.”

The water sloshes violently over the rim as Rowan fights for air that isn’t there, the room spinning, consciousness slipping, and Mojave holds them there, patient as a predator, waiting to see how long this lesson takes.

Mojave keeps Rowan under.

Too long.

At first he’s talking, rambling, breathless, riding the feeling, but then the resistance fades in a way that’s different. No more frantic kicks. No more hands clawing uselessly at his wrists. Just weight. Dead weight.

The water goes still.

For a second Mojave doesn’t notice. He’s panting, soaked to the chest, fur plastered down, ears ringing with adrenaline. The bathwater is dark now, clouded, opaque.

Then it hits him.

“...*Huh.*”

He stills.

He watches Rowan’s body. Waits for a twitch. A reflex. Anything.

Nothing.

Mojave’s grin falters.

He clicks his tongue, annoyed more than afraid. “Ah. *Shit.*”

He yanks Rowan up hard by the hair, water cascading everywhere, Rowan's head lolling uselessly to the side. Their mouth hangs open. No breath. No cough. No fight.

For a split second, he considers it.

Letting it end here.

Letting the water drip, letting the blood settle, letting Rowan become just another story that ends exactly like all the others. It would be easy. Clean, in its own way. He likes endings.

It would be clean. Final. Easy.

But his expression twists, irritation flaring.

"...No," he mutters. "That'd be a waste."

He drags Rowan out of the tub with rough efficiency, water spilling across the floor in sheets. Rowan's body thumps down hard, limbs slack, skin cold and greyed under the grime and blood. The room smells like iron and wet tile.

Mojave stands over them, dripping, breathing hard.

"I hate this part," he grumbles, rolling his shoulders. "You're much more fun when you're screaming."

Still.. useful is *useful*.

He drops to his knees beside Rowan, rough hands already moving, shoving, forcing water out of their lungs with sharp compressions. It's not gentle. It's not kind. It's impatient, mechanical, done out of spite rather than care. He prefers taking things apart, not putting them back together.

"Come on," he snaps quietly. "Don't you dare die on me."

Nothing.

He bares his teeth, growls under his breath, and keeps going.

Rowan doesn't feel pain at first.

There's only black. Warm. Quiet. No blood. No screaming. No Mojave.

Just.. drifting.

Just a soft, weightless drifting. It feels... fine. It feels like letting go.

Their body feels distant, like something already let go of. The fear is gone. Even the hunger is gone. There's a strange peace in it, like sinking into deep water without fighting.

So this is it, some part of them thinks.

And they accept it.

Something tugs at them from far away. An irritation. A pulling sensation, like being yanked back by the ankle when you're trying to sleep.

They ignore it.

Then,

Fire.

Their chest convulses violently. Something burns through their lungs like knives made of air. Their body jolts back into itself with a cruel snap.

Rowan coughs.

Hard.

Water pours out of their mouth as they gasp and choke, lungs spasming, throat raw and tearing. Their whole body arches as breath slams back into them in ugly, desperate gulps. They roll onto their side, retching, coughing, sucking in air like it might vanish again if they don't take enough fast enough.

It hurts. Everything hurts. Their vision swims. The world tilts.

"...Hah," a voice says nearby.

When their eyes finally focus, they see Mojave.

He's kneeling beside them, hands resting on the wet tile, watching with open fascination. Calm again. Collected. Like this was always the plan.

"Well.." he says lightly, tilting his head. "There you are."

Rowan can't speak. They just lie there on the soaked floor, shaking uncontrollably, gasping, coughing, tears streaming down their face without permission.

Mojave studies them for a long moment.

"...Seven minutes," he adds thoughtfully. "Give or take."

He smiles.

"Welcome back."

The bathroom is a wreck.

Water pools across the tile, spreading slowly, catching the dim light and reflecting it back in warped fragments. Blood thins into pink ribbons that snake toward the drain. Everything smells like rust, soap, and something burned out.

Rowan sits slumped against the wall, knees drawn up, arms wrapped loosely around themselves. Their back presses into cold tile. Their head tips back, eyes half-lidded, chest still hitching as they try to get their breathing under control.

Every inhale scrapes. Every exhale shakes. They cough again, dry this time, painful, like their lungs are bruised from the inside. Their throat feels shredded, acidic, raw. There's water still trapped somewhere deep, making every breath sound wrong.

Across from them, Mojave sinks down too.

Not looming. Not threatening.

Just... tired.

He plants himself on the wet floor with his back against the tub, legs stretched out, elbows resting on his knees. Water drips steadily from his fur, pattering onto the tile. His chest rises and falls hard, ears flattened slightly, adrenaline finally bleeding out of him.

For a long moment, neither of them speaks. The only sounds are breathing. Rowan's ragged and uneven. Mojave's slower, controlled, still keyed too high.

Rowan shifts slightly, wincing, sliding their shoulder blades more firmly into the wall. The movement makes their head spin. They close their eyes until it passes.

Of everything.

The church. The cult. The knives. The water. Lila.

This.

This is the worst part.

Not the pain. Not the fear.

The fact that they're still here.

Rowan lets out a weak, humorless sound that might almost be a laugh if it didn't crack halfway through. "You know..." they rasp, voice shredded, barely there, "out of everything you've done... everything you've made me do..."

They swallow, throat burning.

"That was the *cruelest* one."

Mojave's ear twitches.

He glances sideways at them, one eye catching the light. There's a pause, just long enough to register the weight of it.

Then he huffs.

A low, dry chuckle slips out of him. "Yeah," he says mildly. "Figures you'd think that."

He tips his head back against the tub, staring up at the ceiling. Water drips off his chin. "Most people don't appreciate being rescued," he adds. "Very rude, honestly."

Rowan snorts weakly despite themselves, immediately paying for it with another coughing fit. They double over slightly, one hand braced on the floor, breathing through the burn until it eases.

When they straighten again, tears cling stubbornly to their lashes, not fresh panic, just exhaustion leaking out wherever it can.

"You could've let it end," Rowan mutters. "You wanted to."

Mojave hums, considering.

"Mm. Thought about it."

That lands heavier than if he'd denied it. He shrugs one shoulder. "But then what? You finally get peace, and I lose my favorite problem?"

Rowan lets their head thunk back against the wall. The tile is cold enough to ground them, just barely.

"That's not funny."

"I didn't say it was," Mojave replies lightly.

Another stretch of thick silence settles between them, uneasy, but no longer actively dangerous. The threat hasn't disappeared. It's just... resting. Like a predator that's eaten its fill and decided not to kill again tonight.

Rowan's hands tremble faintly in their lap. They watch the shaking like it belongs to someone else.

"I felt it," they say quietly, almost to themselves. "When it stopped."

Mojave's gaze flicks back to them, sharper now.

"And?" he asks.

Rowan swallows. "It was... quiet. I thought—" They pause, searching for the word. "I thought that was it. And I was okay with it."

That earns a small, crooked smile from Mojave.

“See?” he says. “That’s the problem.”

Rowan turns their head, glaring weakly at him through heavy lids. “You’re *sick*.”

Mojave’s smile widens just a touch. “And you’re alive.” He shifts, stretching his shoulders, wincing faintly as if only now noticing the strain in his muscles. “You’ll thank me later.”

“No,” Rowan says immediately. Flat. Certain. “I won’t.”

Mojave chuckles again, softer this time. “We’ll see.”

They sit there like that for a while longer, two exhausted figures on a flooded bathroom floor, both breathing hard, neither willing to move first.

The danger hasn’t ended.

It’s just catching its breath.

The silence stretches.

Not the sharp, screaming kind, this one is dull, heavy, like cotton stuffed into the ears. The kind that follows something final and refuses to feel real yet.

Water keeps dripping somewhere. A slow, irregular tap. Rowan watches it slide along a grout line on the floor, tracing it with unfocused eyes like it’s the only thing tethering them to being awake.

They’re still shaking.

Not violently. Not anymore.

Just... small tremors. Aftershocks. Like their body hasn’t accepted that it’s allowed to exist again.

They died.

Not metaphorically. Not dramatically.

They stopped.

And then they were dragged back.

By him.

Rowan swallows, throat still raw, and winces. Their head lolls slightly to one side, resting against the tile. Their eyes feel too big for their skull, too dry, too tired.

Mojave doesn’t move.

He sits there beside them, waterlogged and quiet, staring ahead with a strange, unreadable stillness. Not triumphant. Not bored. Something else.

Minutes pass. Maybe more. Time feels broken.

Then Mojave exhales, slow, and finally breaks the quiet. "...You know," he says, tone almost casual, "I've never done that before."

Rowan blinks.

Their brain lags, trying to catch up. "Done... what?" they rasp.

Mojave turns his head just enough to look at them.

"Saved someone."

The words hang there, wrong and heavy.

Rowan lets out a weak, incredulous huff. "That's... what you're calling it?"

Mojave hums. "Technically accurate."

Rowan closes their eyes for a second, presses the back of their head harder into the wall like they might disappear into it. "Why," they whisper. "Why bother?" There's no anger in it. No accusation. Just empty confusion.

Mojave's ears flick back.

"I never have," he continues, ignoring the question for a moment. "Never wanted to. Never cared. If something dies, it dies. That's the rule. Clean. Efficient. No loose ends." He pauses, gaze drifting to the blood-diluted water at their feet.

"I still don't care," he adds flatly.

Rowan opens their eyes again.

Mojave finally looks directly at them now, expression sharp but not explosive. Calculating. Coldly honest. "It wasn't your life I was saving," he says. "Don't get sentimental about it."

Rowan's fingers curl weakly against the tile. "Then what was it?" they ask.

Mojave's mouth curves, not a smile, not quite. "My work."

That lands harder than any insult.

"My project," he continues. "My time. My effort. I don't like waste." His eyes narrow slightly. "Waste is a sin."

Rowan's chest tightens.

"People like you," Mojave goes on, voice low, deliberate, "are hard to come by. Stubborn. Capable. Still stupid enough to resist, but strong enough to survive it."

He tilts his head, studying Rowan like a half-finished sculpture.

“Letting you drown would’ve meant all of this—” he gestures vaguely around the room, the house, the path Rowan’s been dragged down “—ended early. For nothing.”

Rowan lets out a quiet, broken laugh. “So I’m... what. Inventory?”

Mojave’s eyes flash. “Don’t cheapen it.”

He leans forward just slightly, elbows resting on his knees. The movement tightens the air again, not violent, but unmistakably threatening.

“You’re an investment,” he says. “And I don’t abandon those lightly.”

Rowan looks away, jaw tight, fighting the sudden sting behind their eyes. Gratitude curdles in their gut, twisted and poisonous. The urge to say thank you rises reflexively, and dies just as fast.

Mojave watches the conflict play across their face with quiet satisfaction.

“Don’t make me regret this,” he says softly.

Rowan’s breath stutters.

Mojave straightens, voice sharpening again, ego reasserting itself like a crown being set back in place. “You should feel honored,” he adds. “Very few things get pulled back from death by something like me.”

He smiles slow, proud of himself, and dangerous. “I give life just as easily as I take it,” he says. “And I promise you—if I ever decide you’re no longer worth the effort?”

He lets the sentence trail off.

The implication is enough.

Rowan says nothing.

They just sit there, soaked and shaking, alive by someone else’s choice, realizing with a hollow certainty that this wasn’t mercy,

It was ownership.

Afterwards,

The bathroom no longer smells like blood and panic. Just soap. Damp tile. Cold air.

Rowan is already done.

They sit on the edge of the tub, wrapped in clothes that aren’t theirs, too big in the shoulders, wrong in the sleeves, clearly Mojave’s leftovers. Utility fabric. Neutral. No comfort in them at all. The mirror across from them reflects a stranger, skin scrubbed raw pink where blood

used to be, hair still clinging damply to their neck, eyes hollowed out like something burned through them and left the shell behind.

Their throat throbs.

A dark, ugly bruise blooms beneath their jaw, fingerprints not even trying to be subtle about it. Every swallow reminds them. Every breath feels deliberate now, like their body doesn't trust itself to do it automatically anymore.

Across the room, Mojave is finishing up. He's towel drying his fur with visible irritation, movements sharp and efficient, ears flattened back in offense. He clearly hates this.. being wet, being cleaned, being stripped of mess. “..Disgusting,” he mutters, dragging the towel down his arms.

Rowan doesn't comment. They just watch.

Without the gear, without the layers, Mojave looks... wrong in a quieter way.

Tall. Lanky. Too fluid. It reminds Rowan that despite being anthropomorphic, he's still just an animal with animalistic traits.

When he steps out of the wet cargo pants, his feline hind legs are briefly exposed, narrow and strong in a way that doesn't read human at all. His waist is small, almost delicate, ribs faintly visible beneath his orange fur when it lies flat, giving him a gaunt, skeletal look. There's something unsettling about how little mass there is to him, how easily he could fold or stretch or coil, like a spider

Then the towel roughs up his fur.

It fluffs.

Rowan's brain, traitorous as ever, registers the change instantly. He looks bigger, softer around the edges, fur puffed out awkwardly from drying. It's... almost ridiculous.

Mojave freezes.

He looks down at himself.

His jaw tightens.

Absolutely not.

He drags the towel harder through his fur, trying to flatten it back down, glaring at his own reflection like it personally offended him. “If you laugh,” he says without looking up, “I will undo all my good work.”

Rowan doesn't laugh.

But something in their chest twitches, an almost-feeling, strangled and quiet. It dies just as fast.

Mojave changes into dry cargo pants, armor restored. The moment passes. Then he kneels in front of Rowan with a first aid kit.

No gentleness. Just precision. Like Rowan is some kind of chore, mundane as washing dishes.

He takes Rowan's hand, turning it palm-up to examine the cut they'd given them earlier, clean, shallow, still angry red. He cleans it, bandages it neatly, fingers firm around their wrist.

His own hand bears Rowan's bite marks, faint crescents bruising his skin. He doesn't acknowledge them. Doesn't treat them. Like they're trophies or nothing at all.

When he finishes, he lets Rowan's hand drop.

Rowan exhales shakily.

Their throat burns. Their neck feels tight. They reach up instinctively, fingers brushing the bruise.

Mojave's eyes flick to the movement.

He pauses.

Not apologetic. Never that.

"Don't touch it too much," he says coolly. "It'll swell."

Rowan swallows. "You say that like you care."

Mojave snorts, standing. "I care about functionality." He looks them over, clean, dressed, breathing. Alive. The bare minimum. "Can't have my project falling apart," he adds.

The room settles again, quieter now. Cleaner.

But the damage is still there.

On skin. In breath. In the space between them.

The silence doesn't last.

Rowan's stomach betrays them.

Not a polite little growl, *no*. It's loud. A wet, aching complaint that echoes off tile and porcelain like the room itself is snitching.

Mojave's ears twitch immediately.

He turns his head, eyes sliding back to Rowan with something between irritation and vindication. Like, *ah. There it is.*

"Well," he says flatly. "That didn't take long."

Rowan freezes, mortified, one hand instinctively pressing to their abdomen like that might shut it up. It doesn't. Another gurgle rolls through them, weaker this time, desperate.

Mojave exhales through his nose and points, not even looking where his finger lands, because he knows exactly what's there.

The dining table.

The venison.

Jane.

Still laid out where it was before. Wet, raw, wrong. The room still faintly smells like iron and bile and spoiled appetite. Rowan's vomit is still there too, half-cleaned at best, a sick reminder of how hard their body rejected this choice earlier.

"You've got options," Mojave says, voice dry. "Limited ones. But options."

Rowan stares at the table, jaw tightening. "I... I can't," they say quietly. Their voice is still rough, scraped raw. "I knew her."

Mojave's eyes narrow, not in anger. In exhaustion. Like he's heard this line too many times from too many mouths.

"Oh," he replies coolly. "That's adorable." He gestures lazily again. "**Eat.**"

Rowan shakes their head. "That's not... that's...it's not the same as the deer. She was a person."

Mojave finally looks at them fully now. And whatever softness might've lingered from earlier is gone. "That's too bad," he says plainly. No sympathy. No pause. "You're a person too. Look how that's going."

He turns away from them, already done with the conversation, and strolls to the fridge. Rowan hears it open. The smell hits immediately. The smell of old blood, raw carcasses. Something dead.

Rowan watches, stomach twisting, as Mojave leans in and peers over shelves stacked with limbs, organs wrapped in plastic, a severed deer head staring glassily from the back like an accusation.

He reaches past it all without hesitation and grabs a beer.

"Alternatively," he adds over his shoulder, cracking it open with a sharp psst, "you could always *eat* your own vomit."

Rowan stiffens.

Mojave takes a sip, finally turning just enough for Rowan to see the sideways curl of his mouth.

“Lap it up off the floor,” he continues mildly. “Like a good dog.”

He takes another drink and walks away, paws thudding softly as he disappears into the living room, utterly uninterested in Rowan’s decision. The TV clicks on. Static, then low noise.

Choice delivered. Responsibility transferred.

Rowan is left alone.

Their stomach growls again, angrier this time. Painful. It folds in on itself, cramps sharp enough to make them hunch forward slightly.

They look at the table.

They look at the floor.

They look at their hands, clean now, shaking faintly. Jane’s face flashes in their mind. Her voice. The way she laughed. The way she screamed.

Rowan swallows hard.

The venison glistens under the light, dark and rich and horrifyingly food-shaped. Their body doesn’t care what it is. Their body only knows it’s starving.

Their mouth waters involuntarily. That realization alone makes their stomach flip. Rowan squeezes their eyes shut, breath shallow, caught between revulsion and need, dignity and survival.

Mojave doesn’t come back.

He doesn’t need to.

The room waits.

And Rowan has never hated being alive more than they do right now.

A few minutes pass.

Long enough for the TV to murmur nonsense into the living room. Long enough for the house to settle back into its usual, obscene calm. Long enough for Mojave to finish his beer and feel that faint, unsatisfying emptiness it always leaves behind.

He clicks his tongue, annoyed, and gets up.

Kitchen. Fridge. Another one.

Routine.

He rounds the corner, and *stops*.

Rowan is at the table.

Actually at the table.

Not frozen. Not hovering. Not retching.

Eating.

For a half second Mojave just stands there, one hand still half-raised like he forgot what it was supposed to do next. His eyes drag over the scene slowly, clinically.

The plate is noticeably emptier. Not picked at. Not nibbled.

A portion is gone.

Rowan sits stiffly, shoulders hunched, movements small and mechanical. Their hands tremble faintly as they lift another piece, hesitating for a breath before forcing themselves to chew. Their jaw works carefully, like if they slow down enough it might stop being real.

They don't look up right away.

They already know he's there.

Mojave's ears flick once.

"...Huh," he says.

There's no mockery in it this time. Just mild surprise. He steps closer, paws soft against the floor, eyes sharp as he takes inventory. How much is missing. How evenly it's been taken. No gagging mess. No dramatic theatrics.

Starvation makes pragmatists out of people fast.

"You were hungrier than I thought," he remarks, tone almost... approving.

Rowan finally looks up.

Their face is flushed, not from exertion, but from shame. Their eyes won't meet his for more than a split second before darting away again. There's a smear of red at the corner of their mouth they clearly hasn't noticed yet.

They swallow hard.

"I didn't—" Their voice catches. They stop, jaw tightening. "I didn't have a choice."

Mojave hums quietly, reaching past them to open the fridge. Cold light spills across both of them. He grabs another beer, pops it open with a practiced flick, and leans against the counter, watching Rowan over the rim.

“You always have a choice,” he says calmly. “You just finally picked survival over self-image.”

He takes a drink.

Rowan’s shoulders curl inward further. They stare down at the plate now like it might look back at them. Their appetite hasn’t vanished, but it’s dulled by something heavier. Guilt. Grief. A slow, nauseating awareness of what they’re doing and how their body doesn’t seem to care anymore.

“I didn’t.. want to,” Rowan mutters.

Mojave snorts softly. “Nobody ever does. That’s the funniest part.” He gestures lazily with the bottle toward the table. “And yet—look at you.”

Rowan flinches at that, fingers tightening around the edge of the plate. They don’t stop eating, though. That’s the part that seems to bother them the most.

Mojave notices.

His smile is thin, satisfied in a way he doesn’t bother hiding. “Relax,” he adds lightly. “You didn’t insult her memory. You honored it.”

Rowan’s head snaps up, eyes sharp with disbelief. “Don’t.”

Mojave raises a brow. “What? She kept you alive longer than most people ever manage. That’s more than sentimentality gets you.” He takes another drink, watching Rowan chew, swallow, breathe through it. “Besides,” he continues casually, “this is the first honest thing you’ve done all day.”

Rowan looks away again, jaw tight, eyes glassy.

They take another bite.

Mojave watches, ears relaxed now, posture loose.

Mildly impressed. And deeply pleased.

Not because Rowan ate.

But because something in them finally broke quietly without screaming. And those breaks?

Those are the useful ones.

Later, the house settles into that familiar, wrong quiet.

Rowan sits at the very end of the couch, spine straight but exhausted, hands folded uselessly in their lap. Their eyes stare forward without really seeing the screen. Their stomach feels

heavy—too full, too aware. Jane's meat sits warm and real inside them, impossible to deny no matter how much they try to dissociate from it.

Across the room, Mojave lounges like a king bored with his throne.

He's sprawled sideways in the armchair, one leg slung over the armrest, boot discarded somewhere offscreen. One bare hind paw hangs lazily in the air, pink pads exposed, flexing now and then in absent-minded rhythm, absurdly soft-looking against the filth of everything else. A beer rests loose in his hand.

The TV flickers.

Blurry, lowquality footage pulses across the screen close-ups of wet, living things. Organs contracting. Membranes shivering. Something that might be a heart, or might be a parasite, or might be both. The audio is distorted, warped into a droning thrum that sounds almost like breathing slowed to the point of abstraction.

Mojave watches it the way someone might watch the evening news. Unbothered. Interested. Familiar, like its actually entertainment.

Minutes pass.

Rowan sits at the far end of the couch. They haven't moved in a while. Their body is there, slumped, elbows on their knees, hands clasped together like they're afraid one might drift away if they let go. Their eyes are unfocused, staring past the TV, past the walls, somewhere far worse.

Jane's meat sits heavy in their stomach. Not physically, not anymore.. but existentially. Like a stone dropped into a well that never hits the bottom. Faces drift through their head in no particular order.

The cult members, eyes wide, mouths open mid-prayer or mid-scream. The priest's weight over their shoulder, the way his blood soaked through fabric. John Doe, frozen in shock. Jane Doe, breaking apart. John Jr.. small, terrified, caught in something he never chose.

And *Lila*.

The bunny's gasping breaths. The helpless way Rowan's hands hovered, useless.

All of it.

For what?

A car battery. For a cat who talks about death like it's art and uses people like tools.

Rowan swallows, throat tight. Tomorrow flashes in their mind, another name, another face, another life Mojave will casually point at like a menu item.

They feel sick again.

They lean back, head resting against the arm of the couch, staring up at the ceiling.

I should've died in that tub.

The thought lands with horrible calm.

It would've been clean. Correct. A full stop instead of this dragging sentence that keeps demanding more blood to justify itself.

Mojave doesn't look at them, but his ears twitch.

"You look constipated," Mojave says suddenly, eyes never leaving the screen.

Rowan exhales a short, humorless huff. "...What."

"That look where your brain's tying itself into knots," Mojave replies. "Like you're trying to shit out a philosophy major."

Rowan doesn't rise to it.

They shift, leaning harder into the armrest, voice quiet but raw. "Are you... are you gonna make me kill someone else?"

Mojave takes a sip of his beer.

"Yes."

No hesitation.

"Tomorrow."

The word hits Rowan like a weight dropped on their chest. They squeeze their eyes shut for a second.

"That's—" Their voice cracks. They laugh weakly instead. "God," they murmur. "That's... that's fucking disgusting."

Mojave finally glances over at them, unimpressed. "You say that like it's new."

Rowan keeps going, quieter now. "I should've died. It would've been... right. You could've strung me up with the rest of your trophies. I don't care. I don't deserve—" Their voice cracks. They swallow. "I don't deserve to keep going after what I've done."

The TV gurgles softly.

Mojave finally glances over, unimpressed. “Drama.”

“Why didn’t you just let me die?” Rowan asks, not looking at him. “Why bring me back?”

Mojave’s tail bone flicks once, irritated. He sighs and sits up properly, rolling his shoulders. His paw slips off the armrest and plants on the floor with a soft, wet sound.

“Because you’re interesting,” he says. “Because you have potential. And because it’d be a shame to watch that rot just because you’re choking on your own guilt.”

Rowan turns their head, eyes sharp now. “That guilt is the only thing proving I’m not like you.”

“Oh, *please*.” Mojave waves his beer dismissively. “Human morality is a bedtime story you tell yourselves so you can sleep at night.”

He leans forward, elbows on his knees now, eyes bright. “You’re all animals. Every last one of you. You pick yourselves every time it comes down to life and death. Just like wolves. Just like cats. Just like me. Human morality is adorable, you know that? All rules and lines and pretty little speeches.. until the moment you’re bleeding out on a bathroom floor.”

He gestures vaguely. “You think you’re special because you feel bad? Every animal on this planet chooses itself when it comes down to it. You pulled the trigger. You kept breathing. Same instinct. Different costume.”

“That’s not true,” Rowan snaps.

Mojave smiles thinly. “It absolutely is. It’s easy to preach empathy when you’re not starving. When your lungs aren’t burning. When no one’s got their hands around your throat.”

Rowan looks up at him now, eyes wet but steady. “I’m not like you.”

Mojave tilts his head. “Oh?”

“I feel it,” Rowan says. “I feel what I’ve done. I hate it. I didn’t want any of this. I still don’t. You can survive without becoming... whatever the fuck you are.”

Mojave goes silent.

He straightens slowly.

The air shifts.

The TV keeps playing, unnoticed now.

Mojave turns fully toward Rowan, eyes locking onto them with a focus so intense it feels like being pinned under a spotlight.

His voice, when he speaks, is calm. Measured.

“A dog that weeps.. after it *kills*,” he says calmly, “is no better than a dog who *doesn't*.”

Rowan freezes.

Mojave’s gaze doesn’t waver.

“Your guilt,” Mojave continues softly, “does not *purify you*.”

Silence crashes down between them.

The distorted music on the TV warbles on, wet and distant, as Rowan sits there, emptied out, realizing that whatever died in the bathtub wasn’t the worst part.

It was whatever Mojave was carving out of them now.

And this time,

There’s no water to drown it out.

No water to drown out the fact that Mojave..

May be right.

Later,

much later,

the house dims into something almost still.

Rowan doesn’t fall asleep so much as they shut down. Their body gives up before their mind can argue. They’re curled awkwardly on the couch, boots still on, arms wrapped around themselves like they’re bracing for impact even in rest. Their face is tight, brows drawn together, lips parted just enough to breathe. It isn’t peaceful. It’s surrender-by-exhaustion.

The TV is off now. The room is dark except for the weak spill of moonlight through the curtains.

Rowan dreams anyway.

They dream of hands, too many of them, grabbing, clawing, pulling them down. They dream of gunshots that never echo, just thud wetly into flesh. They dream of the cult chanting backward, mouths full of blood.

Jane’s face keeps changing into John Jr.’s.

Lila keeps gasping, again and again, no matter how many times Rowan tries to stop it. Every time they pull the trigger in the dream, the recoil snaps their arms backward like they’re the

one being shot.

They whimper softly in their sleep.

Their fingers twitch.

Their breathing stutters, slows, then speeds up again, like their body is trying to decide whether it's safe to keep breathing at all.

Upstairs, a floorboard creaks.

Mojave pauses at the top of the basement stairs, listening. He glances toward the living room, ears flicking once as Rowan's muffled, broken breathing reaches him. For a second, just a second, something unreadable crosses his face.

Then it's gone.

He turns and descends.

The basement swallows him whole.

The light clicks on with a dull hum, illuminating concrete floors stained too deeply to ever be clean again. The air down here is colder. Thicker. It smells like iron, rot, and something older that doesn't have a name anymore.

Mojave rolls his shoulders, stretches his neck, already more at home.

"Let's see," he murmurs to himself.

In the far corner—

The goat priest.

What's left of him.

Cut up exactly how Mojave likes his curiosities, sharp and final. Rowan's handiwork is unmistakable. Its Brutal. Its Efficient. The cuts are uneven, emotional in places. The kind of violence that comes from someone still pretending they aren't capable of it.

Mojave circles the body slowly, hands behind his back, tail stump flicking lazily.

"...You did good," he says, almost approvingly. "Messy. But honest."

He leans in closer, inspecting the damage, the expression frozen on the priest's ruined face.

"Fear changes people," Mojave continues softly. "Strips the lie right off them."

He straightens, eyes glinting.

"Especially the ones who *swear* they're *different*."

Upstairs, Rowan jerks in their sleep, breath hitching as another nightmare tightens around their chest.

Down here, Mojave smiles to himself.

Tomorrow will come soon enough.

And Rowan,

Rowan will wake up alive again.

Whether they want to or not.

Mojave Fanart

Chapter End Notes

Just as I promised, I made fanart of Mojave in this stories edition. Can you believe it took me only 3 in a half days to make? As someone who doesn't usually draw Anthro animal characters, I think I did pretty okay. I plan to post it soon on my Instagram, but I first wanna draw Lila, the priest, and Atticus all together before I post it. So this drawing so far has not been uploaded ANYWHERE else besides here. You guys are the first to see it.

Chapter 11: Atticus

Chapter Summary

Mojave sends you out on your next mission, giving you a gift to wear after every kill.

Chapter Notes

P.s, I proof read this while Christmas grocery shopping. Forgive my potential errors if any 🧠

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Rowan wakes up the way you do when sleep isn't rest, just a shutdown.

Their eyes open slowly, their eyes crusted shut with sleep. Their body doesn't want to come back online. Everything aches in that deep, sour way that feels earned, stiff muscles, throat tight, head pounding like it's packed with wet cotton.

It's quiet.

That's wrong.

No voice. No pacing. No commentary dissecting existence like a corpse on a slab. Just the house breathing.

Rowan lies there for a moment, staring at nothing, waiting for the inevitable. It doesn't come. Their chest tightens anyway. Silence doesn't mean safety here. It just means Mojave is occupied.

They sit up.

Their hands are clean. They scrubbed them raw last night, skin still pink, nails torn, knuckles cracked, but the feeling won't go away. That invisible film. That memory of warmth and slickness. Like the blood sank past skin and into bone.

They rub their palms together.

Still there.

Rowan swings their legs off the couch and stands, moving carefully, like sudden motion might make the world tilt again. The house feels hollow. Empty. Almost peaceful in a way

that feels illegal.

They don't check the basement.

They never do.

They already know where Mojave is. They can feel it the way prey feels eyes on the back of its neck. Whatever's down there, what he keeps, what he does when no one's screaming, they don't want it in their head. Some doors don't open without never closing again.

So Rowan lets themselves have the quiet. They wander the living room. The kitchen. The space between. They sit for a moment, listening to nothing, pretending this is what normal mornings feel like. Pretending today isn't already decided.

Footsteps break the spell.

The basement door opens.

Rowan stiffens.

Mojave emerges like he hasn't been underground with dead things for hours. Fur clean. Movements loose. That same effortless confidence, like the world arranges itself around him naturally.

"Morning," he says.

Rowan doesn't answer.

Mojave glances at them, then smirks. "You look like hell. Must've slept great." He disappears briefly, then returns carrying something folded over his arm.

Rowan's stomach tightens immediately.

"Surprise," Mojave says lightly, tossing it onto the couch.

It lands with a dull, heavy thud.

Gear.

Cargo pants.

A thick leather belt.

A knife holster.

A shotgun strap.

A heavy leather jacket, wool-lined.

Gloves.

Rowan stares at it.

“...What is this.”

Mojave tilts his head. “Preparation.”

“For what.”

“You know what.” A smile. “Put it on.”

Rowan doesn't move.

Mojave's ears flick back, irritation barely restrained. “That wasn't optional.”

After a long, shaking breath, Rowan steps forward.

The pants are heavy. Stiff. Already broken in. They slide on too easily, settling against their hips like they were tailored. The belt cinches tight around their waist, solid, unyielding. The holster hugs their thigh perfectly. The jacket's weight presses down on their shoulders, the wool lining scratchy and warm in a way that makes their skin crawl.

The gloves slide on last.

Rowan looks down at themselves. They don't look like a person anymore. They look like a purpose.

“Looks good,” he says. “Really suits you.”

“...What's it made of,” Rowan asks quietly.

Mojave smiles.

“Oh, you're going to love this part.”

He steps closer, fingers tapping each piece as he speaks, voice bright, proud.

“The holster and strap?” He pats them fondly. “Jane. Soft skin. Worked beautifully once it was treated. Flexible. Strong. She held things together even at the end.. fitting, don't you think?”

Rowan's breath stutters.

“The belt and gloves,” Mojave continues, tapping Rowan's waist, “that's the kid. Tougher than you'd expect. Resilient. Took time to cure properly. there wasn't much to work with. But nothing goes to waste. Funny how small things can still hold so much weight.”

Rowan clenches their fists.

“And the jacket,” Mojave says, gripping the collar, tugging it slightly. “John. Took some effort. He resisted even after he stopped breathing.. fun in its own way. Thick. Protective. Always thought he was shielding his family. Now he *finally* is.”

Rowan's vision blurs.

"Oh.. and the lining?" Mojave adds lightly. "The priest. Thought himself holy even while I was cutting him apart. His skin screamed different. Pride does that."

Rowan jerks back. "What the *fuck* is wrong with you?!"

Mojave's smile sharpens.

"You already drag their grief around like a pathetic shrine. Their screams live rent-free in your head," he says coldly. "Whining. Hesitating. Pretending guilt makes you better." He steps closer, eyes burning. "So you might as well wear them like you've got a spine."

Rowan shakes, rage and nausea crashing together. "They were *people*."

"They were *meat*," Mojave snaps. Then, calmer, "And they don't need it anymore." He exhales, mood shifting instantly, like flipping a switch.

"...Anyway," Mojave says, clapping his hands once. "Enough sentiment."

Rowan's heart sinks.

Mojave grins, eyes glinting with anticipation.

"Let's talk about today's hunt."

Mojave doesn't rush it.

He lets the silence stretch until it feels intentional, until Rowan can feel it crawling under their skin. Then he turns, tail flicking once, and finally speaks.

"Next prey's name is Atticus."

The way he says it, slow, ill intentional, already makes Rowan uneasy.

"I don't even know what the fuck he is," Mojave continues, pacing lazily as if describing the weather. "Man. Not-man. Something that learned how to stand upright and talk pretty. What I do know is this he's a fat, smug prick. Real full of himself. The kind that thinks the world owes him softness."

Mojave stops walking. Looks directly at Rowan. "And don't get comfortable," he says. "This one's dangerous in ways you can't see."

Rowan swallows.

"He's got these big, soft eyes," Mojave goes on, voice dropping into something almost mocking. "Gentle. Earnest. Like he's seen heaven and wants to take you there with him." A faint smirk. "Makes people lean in. Makes them feel chosen."

Mojave's ears twitch. "And that.. voice," he adds quietly. "God. Like *spider silk*. Smooth. Careful. Like he's weaving poetry just for you. Sounds beautiful, right?"

He tilts his head.

"Except while he's smiling sweetly at you, he's imagining all the ways he could ruin you from the inside out."

Rowan's stomach tightens.

"The guy's a pervert," Mojave says flatly. "The worst kind. The kind that wears charm like perfume so you don't smell the rot underneath. People like him don't look dangerous. They make you feel safe. And that's how they get close."

Mojave turns toward the back of the house, gesturing vaguely. "Head out through the gate. Follow the trail. You'll find him slinking around, probably on his patio, playing up that harmless little weirdo act. Reading. Drinking something warm. Pretending he's just... existing."

He looks back at Rowan, eyes sharp.

"*Don't* fall for it."

...

"Kill him on sight."

The words land heavy.

Rowan stands there, wrapped in dead people, listening, and something sour twists in their chest.

"...You talk about him," Rowan says slowly, "like he's *worse* than you."

Mojave doesn't hesitate.

"He *is*."

Rowan blinks. "You're—" Their voice wavers. "***You're*** saying that?"

Mojave laughs once, short and humorless. "You think *I'm* sick?" He shakes his head. "Atticus is truly depraved. Difference is, I don't put on some sweet, humble fuck act. You get all of me the second you meet me."

He steps closer.

"No lies. No masks. No pretending I'm harmless."

His eyes narrow.

"And I don't appreciate him stealing *my* prey."

Rowan stiffens. “Your... prey?”

“Only one predator gets to rule this part of the desert,” Mojave says calmly. “And it isn’t going to be him.”

Rowan looks away, jaw tight. None of this sits right. Not the certainty. Not the way Mojave speaks like he owns the land, the lives on it, the narrative itself. “...Are you only saying all this,” Rowan asks quietly, “to make me feel better?”

Mojave pauses.

Rowan forces themselves to continue. “Because.. because you think killing someone bad will fix this?” Their voice cracks. “Because I’ve been—” They stop. Swallow. “Because I haven’t been okay.”

For a moment, Mojave just stares.

Then he chuckles. Soft. Low. Almost fond.

“I drowned you in my tub,” he says evenly. “Held your head under the water and watched the life fade out of your eyes.”

Rowan freezes.

“I almost killed you,” Mojave continues. “No—” a correction, sharp, “I *did* kill you.” He leans in just enough that Rowan can smell him.

“So don’t flatter yourself,” he murmurs. “I don’t give a single fuck about your feelings. I’m not here to comfort you. I’m not here to make this easier.”

His smile returns, slow and dangerous. “I’m here because you’re useful. Because you’re adaptable. Because the monster in you just hasn’t accepted itself yet.”

He straightens.

“Atticus is tonight,” Mojave says lightly. “*Don’t* disappoint me.”

And just like that, the conversation is over, leaving Rowan standing there, wrapped in the dead, staring at the door they’ll soon have to walk through.

Rowan does exactly what they’re told.

They leave through the back gate without looking back, shotgun clenched so tight their fingers ache. The leather strap bites into their shoulder with every step, a constant reminder of what they’re wearing, who they’re wearing. The desert air feels colder out here, thinner, like it doesn’t quite want them in it.

The dirt path winds away from the house, narrow and well-trodden, swallowed slowly by scrub and cooked cactuses. Each step crunches too loud in Rowan’s ears. Every sound feels amplified, the creak of leather, the soft rattle of the gun, their own breathing.

They walk for a while without really seeing where they're going.

Mojave's voice keeps replaying in their head.

Big, soft eyes.

Spider silk voice.

Kill him on sight.

Rowan swallows hard.

What if he's lying?

The thought worms its way in and refuses to leave. Mojave lies constantly, not always with words, but with framing, with omission, with the way he decides who deserves to be called a monster. Rowan's killed innocent people because Mojave said they had to. Families. A child. A girl who just wanted to get home.

What if Atticus is just... another person?

Another convenient story.

Rowan tightens their grip on the shotgun, jaw clenching. They try to remind themselves of what Mojave said, *truly depraved, worse than me*, but doubt keeps leaking through the cracks. Mojave hates competition. Mojave hates losing control. Mojave hates when something exists outside his narrative.

The dessert path curves.

The hill rises.

And then Rowan sees it.

A cabin.

Small. Wooden. Nestled between the trees like it belongs there. The porch is swept clean. The windows are intact, glowing faintly with warm yellow light. There's a rocking chair on the porch, a folded blanket draped neatly over the arm. A lantern hangs by the door, polished, cared for.

It looks... lived in.

It looks safe.

Rowan slows to a stop, heart thudding painfully in their chest.

This is not what they expected.

This isn't a lair. There are no warning signs, no rot, no bloodstains or barricades or grotesque trophies. It looks like the kind of place someone builds because they want peace. Because

they want to be left alone. Because they want to make something small and gentle in the middle of nowhere.

Rowan feels sick.

Their fingers twitch on the trigger guard.

Kill him on sight.

They step closer, boots quiet against the dirt now. Each step feels heavier than the last, like the ground itself is resisting them. The smell of woodsmoke drifts faintly through the air, something warm, comforting, almost nostalgic.

They force themselves to breathe.

In. Out.

This could still be a trick, they tell themselves. Monsters don't always look like monsters. Mojave said that himself. Soft places can hide rot. Gentle voices can carry knives.

But still..

Their stomach twists.

Rowan shifts their stance, adjusting the shotgun, bracing it properly like they've been taught. They roll their shoulders once, trying to shake the tremor out of them. If he really is what Mojave says, Rowan thinks grimly, then this ends fast.

And if he isn't..

They don't finish that thought.

They steel themselves, step out of the trees, and move toward the cabin, every sense screaming, every instinct at war with the weight of the gun in their hands.

Rowan slips inside as quietly as a ghost.

The door barely makes a sound when it closes behind them, just a soft click swallowed by the cabin's stillness. Inside, the light is dim, mostly natural, thin beams of dusk filtering through the windows and settling gently on the floorboards. Dust motes drift lazily in the air. Everything feels... slow. Unthreatening.

It smells like cinnamon.

Not sharp. Not overpowering. Warm. Domestic. The kind of smell that sinks into your clothes and makes you think of winter mornings and something baking for no reason other than kindness.

The place is immaculate.

Not sterile, lived-in. The floors are swept. The furniture is polished but worn at the edges. And in front of every window sits a small flower vase, each one holding a different bloom. Alive. Thriving. Some of them have clearly been tended to for a while, trimmed stems, fresh water, petals open and healthy.

Rowan's stomach churns.

This *isn't right*.

They tighten their grip on the shotgun, knuckles whitening, stance instinctively braced the way Mojave drilled into them. Feet planted. Shoulders squared. Ready. Always ready.

But the harder they prepare, the sicker they feel.

From somewhere deeper in the cabin, soft music drifts out, old crackly black and white tunes, the kind that sound like they belong to another lifetime. Something cheerful. Something harmless.

Rowan's heart starts racing.

Not the sharp panic of a firefight. This is worse. This is that awful, crawling dread, the kind that rolls through your gut when you know something horrible is about to happen and your body is already bracing for it. Like leaning over a toilet, waiting. Like sitting in a plastic chair while someone tightens a rubber band around your arm and tells you to look away.

They don't want to do this.

Their hands tremble despite their effort to steady them.

Rowan moves forward anyway.

Each step deeper into the cabin feels like trespassing into something sacred.

The music gets clearer.

So does the faint, rhythmic click of something mechanical.

Rowan turns the corner into the living room.

A television sits against the far wall, unmistakably old, its screen flickering softly with vintage cartoons, rubber-hose animation, bouncing characters, exaggerated expressions. The sound is low, almost background noise, like it's there for company rather than entertainment.

There's a small dining table with two neatly set placemats, mismatched mugs hanging from hooks near the counter. A pot sits on the stove, long cooled, but clean. Used recently. Loved.

And then-

Atticus.

He's sitting in a couch in front of the TV, back partially turned, massive frame relaxed. A giant brown owl, feathers soft and full, posture gentle and unguarded. Chubby in a comforting way. His wings rest loosely at his sides. He hums faintly along with the tune, off-key but happy.

Rowan freezes.

The shotgun is raised. Aimed. Perfectly lined up.

Atticus lifts his head slightly, noticing movement, but squints, clearly unable to see well.

"Oh! Hello there!" he says warmly, voice deep and kind, like a fireplace come to life. "I'm sorry, friend, I didn't hear anyone walk in. Just a moment—let me put my glasses on."

He reaches for the side table.

Rowan's breath shatters in their chest.

Up close, it's worse.

Atticus looks... good. Not in the way Mojave described. His feathers are well-kept. His gold eyes, though narrowed now, are soft, unfocused, curious rather than calculating. He looks like the kind of person who leaves food out for animals. Who talks to plants. Who apologizes to furniture when he bumps into it.

Their hands start shaking violently.

If Atticus puts his glasses on, he'll see the gun.

Rowan doesn't think.

They drop the shotgun.

It hits the floor with a dull thud, loud in the quiet cabin.

Atticus startles slightly but doesn't react with fear. He pauses, then gently sets his glasses on his beak, adjusting them carefully.

"There we go," he says with a small chuckle. "That's more like it."

He looks up.

Sees Rowan properly now.

Tall. Rigid. Pale. Trembling. Eyes wide and glassy like a cornered animal. Hands empty but shaking, fingers curled inward as if still holding the ghost of the weapon.

Atticus blinks once.

Twice.

Then his expression softens immediately.

“Well now,” he says gently, rising slowly from his seat so he doesn’t startle them. He’s even bigger standing up, broad, solid, impossibly present. “My memory’s been goin’ lately, but I don’t think we know each other, right?”

He gives a small, warm smile.

“Name’s Atticus. It’s a real pleasure to meet ya.”

Rowan doesn’t respond.

They just stand there.

Staring.

Their chest tightens painfully, like something is cinching a wire around their lungs. Their vision blurs. The room tilts. Their knees feel weak, useless.

This is wrong. *This is all wrong.*

Atticus isn’t cruel. He isn’t sharp-edged or hungry or watching them like prey. He looks... worried. Concerned. Like Rowan just walked into his home bleeding.

And that kindness..

It hits Rowan harder than any punch ever could.

It reminds them of Lila.

Of hands that didn’t hurt. Of voices that didn’t demand. Of warmth without strings attached.

Something inside them breaks.

Rowan’s breath stutters once, twice, and then they’re sobbing.

It’s ugly. Loud. Their shoulders shake violently as they fold inward, hands flying up to clutch at their chest like they’re trying to keep themselves from splitting apart. Tears spill freely, choking gasps ripping out of them as weeks, months, years of violence and obedience and rot come pouring out all at once.

“I—I can’t—” Rowan chokes, words dissolving into sobs. “I don’t— I don’t wanna—”

Atticus freezes for half a second, clearly startled, then immediately moves closer, but slowly, carefully, wings slightly lifted in a non-threatening way.

“Oh—oh no,” he murmurs, voice thick with concern. “Hey now, hey... it’s alright. You’re alright.”

He stops a respectful distance away, crouching slightly so he’s not looming. “Easy,” Atticus says softly. “Take your time. You’re safe here.”

Rowan collapses to their knees. The sound echoes faintly through the cabin.

Atticus's eyes widen with alarm. He kneels too, movements surprisingly gentle for someone his size, scanning Rowan quickly like he's trying to assess injuries he can't see.

"Hey.." he says again, quieter now. "Friend... what's happened to you?"

Rowan doesn't try to hold it in anymore.

The words come out mangled, tripping over each other, soaked in sobs so violent it feels like their ribs might crack under the strain. Their hands claw at their own jacket, at the leather that suddenly feels wrong, suffocating, like it's crawling on them.

"He—he sent me," Rowan gasps, voice breaking so badly it barely sounds human. "That fucking—orange—cat—he sent me here to kill you—"

Their breath hitches hard, chest spasming. "I didn't wanna do it," they choke. "I never wanted to do any of it. He keeps—he keeps making me—people—innocent people—he tells me they deserve it and then he—he watches—"

Their eyes squeeze shut as another wave of tears spills over.

"I can't anymore," Rowan sobs. "I don't wanna do this anymore. I don't wanna be like this. I just—I just wanna go home." The word home comes out small. Broken. Like they're not even sure it still exists.

For a moment, Atticus just stares.

Not in judgment. Not in fear.

In recognition.

Something heavy settles in his expression. His shoulders drop slightly, and he lets out a long, tired sigh that sounds like it's been waiting years to escape.

"...So," he says quietly, rubbing a wing over his face, "Mojave sent you here, huh?"

Rowan nods weakly, eyes red and swollen, tears still dripping off their chin.

Atticus exhales again, slow and controlled, then gives a sad little huff of a laugh with no humor in it.

"Makes sense," he murmurs. "Figures it'd come to this eventually."

Rowan blinks up at him, confused.

"He and I," Atticus continues, voice calm but weighted, "used to dine together once upon a time. Long evenings. Polite conversation. Shared meals." He shakes his head faintly.

"Stopped over a... small disagreement."

He doesn't elaborate.

Doesn't have to.

"And ever since," Atticus says softly, "he's been threatenin' to harm me. Circling my home. Leave little reminders. He's a twisted little cat, that one. Always has been."

Rowan's shoulders tremble again, but this time it's not just from crying, it's relief. Validation. Someone finally saying it out loud.

Atticus looks back at Rowan properly now.

The shaking. The hollowed cheeks. The way their eyes keep darting like they're waiting to be punished for speaking. The way their body hasn't relaxed once.

And then,

Atticus straightens slightly and his tone changes, brightening just a touch.

"Well," he says gently, "first things first."

He rises to his feet and extends a wing toward Rowan, palm open, offering, not demanding.

"You look like you haven't eaten a proper meal in far too long," he says. "How do you feel about a warm cup of tea and somethin' real in your stomach?"

Rowan freezes.

"...Tea?" they croak.

"And food," Atticus adds, nodding toward the kitchen. "The cooked kind. The civilized kind."

Something flickers in Rowan's eyes.

Hunger. Real hunger. Not the gnawing desperation Mojave fed on, something deeper, aching, forgotten. Raw venison flashes through their mind. Blood on their hands. The metallic taste they were forced to swallow.

Their stomach twists painfully.

"Yes," Rowan whispers immediately. Then louder, desperate, "Yes—please."

Atticus smiles. It's warm. Genuine. The kind that reaches his eyes. "Thought so," he says kindly. He steps closer, careful again not to crowd them, and gently guides Rowan toward the couch with a light touch at their elbow. "Go on now. Sit. You're safe here."

Rowan lets themselves be led.

The couch is soft. Their body almost collapses into it, exhaustion finally catching up now that no one is screaming orders at them. Their hands tremble in their lap, but their shoulders sag,

just a little.

Atticus moves toward the kitchen, already humming faintly again as he sets water to boil, movements practiced and soothing.

“Tea first,” he calls back gently, “then we’ll worry about everything else. One thing at a time, alright?”

Rowan nods, staring at the floor. For the first time in what feels like forever, the silence doesn’t feel like a threat.

It feels like mercy.

The kettle begins to murmur on the stove, a low, comforting sound that feels almost unreal after the constant tension Rowan’s lived in. Atticus moves around the kitchen with an easy familiarity, like this is a ritual he’s done a thousand times, not rushed, not frantic, just kind. He pulls a tin from the shelf, the soft clink of metal echoing faintly, and the smell of dried herbs drifts into the air once he opens it.

“Chamomile and a touch of cinnamon,” Atticus says over his shoulder, voice gentle. “Helps settle the nerves. And the stomach.”

Rowan watches from the couch, fingers curled tightly into the sleeves of the jacket. Even now, they can feel the wrongness of it on their skin, but the warmth in the room dulls the edge of the panic. The cinnamon smell wraps around them like a memory they don’t quite recognize but desperately miss.

Atticus sets a mug on the counter, pours the hot water, and lets the tea steep. Then he turns his attention to the food, real food. Not raw. Not bloody. Not someone they ate with. Not eaten under threat. Bread, warm and lightly toasted. A plate of roasted vegetables glistening with oil. Something savory, soft, filling. The smell alone makes Rowan’s stomach cramp painfully.

Atticus carries the plate over first, setting it gently on the low table in front of Rowan, followed by the mug of tea. Steam curls up between them.

“There you are,” he says softly. “Take your time.”

Rowan nods.

Then absolutely *does not* take their time.

The moment the plate is within reach, something feral snaps awake inside them. They lean forward, shoulders hunched, and eat like they’re afraid it’ll be taken away if they pause. No hesitation. No manners. Just survival. Bite after bite after bite, barely chewing, barely breathing, hands shaking as they shovel the food in.

The world narrows to taste and heat and fullness.

By the time Rowan finally lifts their head, the plate is spotless.

Gone.

Not a crumb left.

They suck in a sharp breath like they've just surfaced from underwater, chest heaving slightly.

Atticus blinks.

Then he lets out a soft, surprised laugh, warm, not mocking.

"Well I'll be," he says with gentle amusement. "I reckon that plate didn't stand a chance."

Rowan's face burns instantly. They wipe their mouth quickly with the back of their hand, eyes darting away. "I—sorry," they mumble hoarsely. "I didn't mean to—"

Atticus waves it off immediately. "Oh hush now. That wasn't rude, that was hungry."

He peers at Rowan's face again, expression softening. "You want another plate?"

Rowan's stomach twists, not with hunger this time, but with guilt. They do want another. *God*, they want another so badly their hands ache. But the thought of asking feels heavy, like they're taking something they don't deserve.

"Oh—no," Rowan says quickly, shaking their head. "It's fine. I don't wanna take up your time or—your food or—"

"Nonsense," Atticus interrupts, already standing.

Rowan freezes. "You don't have to—"

"I know I don't," Atticus says gently, heading back into the kitchen anyway. "Which is exactly why I'm doin' it." He begins fixing another plate without hesitation, movements calm and deliberate.

"And let's be honest," he adds over his shoulder, "there can't be much to eat at Mojave's place. Not for someone like you."

Rowan swallows hard.

The truth of it lands painfully.

Atticus returns with a second plate, just as full as the first, and sets it down again. "Eat," he says softly. "You're not a burden. You're a guest."

Rowan stares at the plate for a long second.

Then slowly, shakily, they reach for it.

This time they eat a little slower, but not by much.

And Atticus stays nearby, humming quietly, as if this, feeding someone who's been starved in every way that matters, is the most natural thing in the world.

A little while later, the plate sits empty again, this time more politely, wiped clean with a napkin instead of desperation. Rowan leans back into the couch cushions, jacket finally shrugged off and draped over the armrest like it weighs a thousand pounds less off their body. Their shoulders sink. For the first time in what feels like forever, their stomach is warm instead of aching, their throat doesn't burn, and their head isn't spinning from hunger or adrenaline.

They cradle the mug of tea in both hands, letting the steam fog their vision.

"...Thank you," Rowan says quietly. Their voice sounds different now, still tired, but steadier. Human again. "You didn't have to do any of this. Really. I—I'm grateful. More than I know how to say."

Atticus looks up from where he's rinsing a dish, ears flicking slightly. He turns, towel over his shoulder, and gives Rowan a soft, almost sheepish smile. "Oh, it's nothin'," he says easily. "Food's meant to be shared. Tea too. Otherwise it just tastes... lonely."

That earns a small huff of laughter from Rowan before they can stop themselves. They glance down at the mug, embarrassed, but Atticus just chuckles. He settles into the couch, folding his wings comfortably, posture relaxed in a way that feels intentional, as if he's making sure Rowan doesn't feel cornered.

"I don't get many visitors," Atticus admits after a moment, tone light but honest. "Most folks don't wander this far out unless they're lost or runnin' from somethin'. And the ones who do don't usually stay." He shrugs. "So... it's nice. Having someone to cook for. Someone to worry about a little."

Rowan's chest tightens at that, not painfully, just enough to remind them they're alive. "You're... really kind," Rowan says, quieter now. "You know that?"

Atticus snorts softly. "Careful. That kind of talk'll ruin my reputation."

Rowan actually chuckles this time, a small sound but real.

Atticus grins, eyes crinkling behind his glasses. "Truth is, I talk to myself a lot. The kettle. The radio. Sometimes the stray cats, if they're feelin' chatty. But they're terrible conversationalists. One of 'em keeps judging my décor."

Rowan glances at the flower vases by the windows. "The flowers?"

"Exactly," Atticus says solemnly. "No appreciation for seasonal blooms. Tragic."

Another quiet laugh slips out of Rowan, surprising even them. They lean deeper into the couch, exhaustion still heavy but no longer crushing.

For a brief, fragile moment, the world feels... paused.

No orders. No blood. No voice in their ear telling them who to become next.

Just warmth. Cinnamon. A soft old cartoon murmuring on the TV. And a gentle owl who chose to care, even when it would've been easier not to.

Rowan doesn't say it out loud, but the thought settles in their chest all the same,

This is what it's supposed to feel like.

 Lila Fanart

Chapter End Notes

Woohhooo we made it to the Atticus Chapter! 🦉

Everything in this fanfic was already prewritten. I had started writing this story as SOON as the game was released and I originally wasn't even gonna post it on here until I saw how small the Fandoms fan content was. I had wrote all the way up to the Atticus chapter, so the next few chapters maaayy take a teeny tiny bit longer to release because I have to keep writing the rest now.

Warning though, the next few chapters regarding Atticus are gonna be HELLA worse than it was shown in the game. I plan to make it more gorey and messed up. There will be torture involved and forced submission, mutilation, abuse, etc. It's gonna be the most intense and probably longest chapter I will ever release. It may need 3 parts. That's how crazy things are gonna get. So it's gonna differ a lot from the game, but the atmosphere and characterization will still be the same.

I also hope you guys like the Lila Fanart! Shockingly, she was more difficult to draw than Mojave. I really struggle with drawing rabbits. She's a cutie pie though.

The priest is next! So far that one is taking the longest

Chapter 12: Gift Wrapped

Chapter Summary

Atticus comforts you and takes you down to the cellar

Chapter Notes

Merry Christmas everyone!!! I hope everyone is having a fabulous Christmas!! Enjoy some fresh baked agony!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Atticus watches Rowan for a moment, then clears his throat gently, like he's testing if whether the question will bruise or not. "So," he says, folding his wings together, voice mild but curious, "how does someone like you end up bein' ... the orange kitten's little assassin?" There's no accusation in it. Just bewilderment. Genuine soft curiosity.

Rowan lets out a long, exhausted sigh that feels like it drags up dust from the bottom of their lungs. They lean back, stare at the ceiling for a second, then scrub a hand down their face. "...*God*," they mutter. "Where do I even start."

Atticus hums. "Take your time."

Rowan swallows. "I was just... passing through. That's it. I wasn't looking for anything. I wasn't running from anyone. My car battery had been acting up for months, and I kept telling myself I'd replace it when I had the money. Classic mistake."

They laugh once, bitter and hollow. "Middle of nowhere. Desert heat. Battery finally gives out completely. Dead. No signal. No one around." They gesture vaguely. "So I start walking. Just... pick a direction and hope."

Their fingers tighten around the mug.

"And then I see this house."

Atticus's expression shifts immediately. Not surprised, just... resigned.

"Mojave," Rowan continues. "I knock. Ask for help. Like an idiot. He was weird as hell, red flags all over, but he said he got a spare battery." Rowan pauses, jaw tightening. "But nothing's free. Not with him."

Atticus exhales slowly through his beak. "Of course."

"He says I gotta hunt deer for him," Rowan says. "Just one. I thought.. okay, fine. Gross, but fine. I need the battery." Their voice drops. "What he didn't tell me was that they weren't... animals. Not really."

Atticus's eyes soften.

"They talked," Rowan says quietly. "They had opinions. Like you. They argued. They had a home. A table. A family. There were three of them. Parents. And a kid."

Silence stretches between them, thick and heavy.

"...It didn't end well," Rowan finishes, voice barely above a whisper. "And that was just the beginning." They rub their face again, like they're trying to wipe the memory off their skin. "After that, it was always something else. Another 'favor' after another. Another condition. Another threat. Every time I thought maybe I could leave, he'd remind me how easy it would be to make sure I never did."

Atticus lets out a short, humorless laugh. It sounds tired. Old.

"All *that*," he says quietly, "for a *car battery*."

Rowan nods once. "Yeah."

Atticus shakes his head slowly. "That's... profoundly Mojave." He leans back in his chair, eyes unfocusing as old memories surface. "He and I used to share meals, once upon a time. Long ago. We'd talk philosophy. Survival. Predation. He liked to hear himself speak. Always did." A faint, grim smile tugs at his beak. "One night I told him I didn't agree with him. Just that. That maybe power didn't give someone the right to do whatever they wanted."

Atticus chuckles softly. "He didn't like that."

Rowan looks at him. "What did he do?"

Atticus shrugs. "Threatened my life. Casually. Like he was talkin' about the weather. Told me I was 'wasting potential' by not embracing what I was." His gaze sharpens slightly. "That's the thing about him. Mojave doesn't just hurt people. He justifies it. Wraps it up in pretty words so he can sleep at night." He looks back at Rowan, expression gentle again. "You didn't become anything, kid. You were cornered."

Rowan's throat tightens. "That doesn't make what I did okay," they murmur.

"No," Atticus agrees softly. "But it makes it understandable." He reaches for the teapot, topping off Rowan's mug without asking. "And that matters more than Mojave would ever admit."

The radio hums softly in the background. Outside, the woods remain still. For the first time since the desert swallowed them whole, Rowan doesn't feel like a monster sitting across from

a predator. They feel like someone who made the wrong turn, and is still desperately trying to find a way back.

Rowan goes quiet. Not the kind of quiet that's empty, but the kind that's crowded. Heavy. Their fingers tighten slowly around the mug, knuckles paling as their gaze drifts somewhere past Atticus, past the cabin walls, back through every wrong turn that led them here.

The deer family.

The church.

Jane. John. John Jr.

Lila.

Mojave's hands on their throat.

The water.

The silence after.

Rowan's shoulders tremble, just barely. Tears well but don't fall, clinging stubbornly to their lashes like they're afraid to commit. "...Sometimes," Rowan says quietly, voice thin and shaking, "sometimes I think he's not always wrong."

Atticus doesn't interrupt.

"Mojave keeps telling me I'm just like him," Rowan continues. "That I'm a monster pretending I'm not. That I like this. That I'm just too cowardly to admit it." Their jaw tightens. "And I know that's not true. I don't enjoy any of it. I never have. I feel sick every time. I can still feel their blood on me even when I'm clean."

They swallow hard. "But he said something," Rowan whispers. "Something I can't stop thinking about."

They look down at the floor.

'A dog who weeps after it kills is no better than a dog who doesn't.'

"And he said my guilt doesn't purify me." Rowan lets out a shaky breath. "And maybe... maybe he's right about that part. Just because I hate it. Just because I feel bad. That doesn't undo anything. It doesn't bring them back." Their voice cracks.

"So maybe I am just as bad. Maybe knowing it's wrong doesn't make me any better than him."

The room goes still.

The old cartoons murmur faintly in the background, muffled by the cabin walls. The kettle clicks softly as it cools. Atticus doesn't rush to fill the silence. He lets it stretch, lets Rowan's

words settle instead of brushing them away.

Finally, he shifts. He leans forward slightly, elbows resting on his knees, golden eyes gentle but steady. "But it shows you do not take pride in your sins," Atticus says softly.

"And regret," he continues, "always leaves room for replacement."

Atticus speaks slowly, carefully, like each word is something fragile he doesn't want to drop. "Mojave confuses inevitability with truth," he says. "He believes once someone has crossed a line, they belong to it forever. That a single act defines the whole of a soul." He shakes his head faintly. "That's convenient, for someone who never wants to change."

Rowan looks up with red eyes, searching his gaze.

"You say your guilt doesn't purify you," Atticus goes on. "And you're right. Guilt alone isn't salvation. But it is evidence."

"Evidence of what?" Rowan asks hoarsely.

"That you still know the difference," Atticus replies. "That you still care."

He lets that sit, then continues, voice firmer now.

"Mojave loves to talk about choice, doesn't he? Choice to kill. Choice to survive. Choice to become."

Rowan nods slowly.

"Well," Atticus says gently, "today you made one."

Rowan frowns faintly, confused.

"You stepped into my home," Atticus says. "You had a gun. You were told to kill me on sight. You could have done it before I even saw your face." His gaze meets Rowan's fully now. Steady. Unflinching.

"But you *didn't*."

Rowan's lips part, but no words come out.

"You chose to lower the weapon," Atticus continues. "You chose to listen. You chose to tell the truth. You chose, despite fear, hunger, conditioning, and terror, not to pull that trigger." He smiles softly. "That wasn't an accident."

Rowan's chest tightens, something warm and painful blooming there.

"That choice," Atticus says, "is concrete. Real. Mojave can drown you, starve you, break you, but he can't undo it. He can't take it away. It exists now, whether he likes it or not."

Rowan's eyes finally spill over. Silent tears slide down their cheeks, unchecked.

“You are not what he says you are,” Atticus adds quietly. “You are someone who was forced to do terrible things, and still chose mercy when it mattered most.” He leans back slightly, giving Rowan space again. “That doesn’t erase the past,” he says. “But it opens the future. And that’s something Mojave will never understand.”

Rowan presses a trembling hand to their mouth, shoulders shaking, not with panic this time, but with something closer to relief. For the first time, Mojave’s words don’t feel like iron bars closing in.

They feel... cracked.

And through those cracks, something like light is trying to get in. Rowan’s shoulders start shaking again, but this time it’s different. It’s quiet. Small. Almost embarrassed. They bring a hand up to their face, pressing their knuckles against their mouth like they’re trying to keep the sound in, but the tears come anyway. Slow at first, then heavier. Their chest rises and falls in uneven pulls, breath hitching, not from panic, not from horror, not from guilt crushing in on them like it has every other time.

This hurts in a gentler way. It hurts like something waking up.

“I—” Rowan tries, then stops. Their voice won’t cooperate. They just shake their head, eyes squeezed shut, tears slipping down and dripping off their chin. “I didn’t think... I didn’t think there was a future.”

Atticus doesn’t move closer. He doesn’t crowd them. He just stays where he is, presence warm and steady, like a lamp left on in a dark room. “That makes sense,” he says softly. “Hard to imagine tomorrow when yesterday keeps grabbing you by the ankles.”

That earns a weak, broken laugh from Rowan, half-sob, half-breath. They wipe at their face, smearing tears across their sleeve without caring. “You make it sound so simple.”

“Oh, it’s not,” Atticus replies easily. “If it were simple, I’d have bottled it and sold it years ago. Retired somewhere nice. Maybe with better curtains.”

Rowan snorts despite themselves. It surprises them. They hadn’t laughed like that in... gods, they can’t even remember.

Atticus smiles wider, clearly pleased. “And for what it’s worth,” he adds, adjusting his glasses, “Mojave has been wrong about many things. For example... fashion, interpersonal communication, and the deeply misguided belief that being orange makes one *profound*.”

Rowan lets out a wet chuckle, shaking their head. “He’d hate that.”

“Oh, tremendously,” Atticus says with mock solemnity. “Which is how I know it’s true.”

Rowan laughs again, a little stronger this time, even as tears still slide down their cheeks. They hug their arms around themselves, shoulders slumping, not in defeat, but in release. Like they’ve been holding themselves rigid for days and finally, finally let go. “...Thank you,” Rowan murmurs after a moment. “For listening. For—everything.”

Atticus waves a hand lightly. "You were overdue for kindness. Happens to the best of us." He pauses, then adds gently, "And the worst."

That makes Rowan smile tiredly, small but genuine. They lean back into the couch cushions, exhaustion still there, trauma still there, but beneath it now, something else has taken root. Something fragile and dangerous in its own way.

Hope.

For the first time in a long while, the future doesn't feel like a threat. It feels like a possibility.

Rowan stayed slumped on the couch, jacket pooled around them, sleeves damp from where their hands had been pressed to their face. Their breath was still shaky, chest heaving faintly with the remnants of crying. The room was quiet for a moment, save for the faint hum of wind rattling the windows, the faint clink of a stray spoon from the kitchen. They were beginning to imagine, just for a second, that maybe the world could be quiet for longer than a few minutes. That maybe, for a sliver of time, they could catch their breath without a catlike orange monster looming over them, pushing them toward the unspeakable.

"I hate to break it to you," Atticus says slowly, leaning back in his chair, feathered fingers laced over his stomach, "but... I don't think Mojave... even owns a car battery—"

"—What."

Rowan rose back up from their seat like Jason Voorhees rising back from the dead.

Atticus froze. The words barely registered at first. He wasn't even sure whether to continue or not without breaking Rowan's fragile psyche. He then sighs, a small humorless laugh escaping him. "Yeah... I've been to his place before. I mean, a few times. I've seen most of what he keeps." He tilts his head, eyes narrowing thoughtfully. "Never seen a car battery. Not once. That's not the kind of thing Mojave collects. You know... think about it." He gestures vaguely at the cabin around them, at the warm quiet, the carefully arranged furniture, the subtle scent of life itself.

"What use would he have for one? He doesn't own a vehicle. He doesn't even use much technology, besides that generator of his, and the stereo he has blasting whatever hellish static he calls music." He pauses, almost smirking, as if he can't resist the cruel honesty. "Mojave collects... other things. Things that scream to him. Things that move, or cry, or bleed. His place is too crowded with carcasses to fit something as mundane as a random car battery."

Rowan's heart sank. "So... so... have I... been doing all this for nothing?" Their voice shook, fragile and raw. "Did I just... commit... genocide... for no reason?"

Atticus made a low, almost involuntary hiss, a mix of sympathy and disgust, and leaned back slightly in his chair. "I don't know... but most likely." His eyes softened with something almost like pity. "Mojave... he does that. Gives people hope, even just a sliver. Makes them chase it like it's a lifeline. And then... well, you know. Watches it drain from their eyes later. It's... true. He's even said it himself. He thrives on that."

Rowan's hands fell limply into their lap, trembling just slightly, their mind a jumbled mess of horror and exhaustion. Their chest tightened. Every breath felt shallow, like the walls were closing in. They had done all of it. Every life taken, every choice, every moment of complicit horror, and for what? For a lie? A cruel trick played by a creature who delighted in watching the world bend beneath him? The thought curled around Rowan's stomach, tight and nauseating, and for a moment, for the first time in a long while, they imagined the cold, clean release of a gun pressed to their temple.

Their hands inched toward the edge of the couch. Their mind whispered dark promises. Maybe it would be easier. Maybe it would be better. Maybe all of this blood, guilt, and pain.. could end in a single click.

And then Atticus's voice cut through the haze, calm, deliberate, comforting. "But... lucky for you," he said softly, leaning a little closer, "I do own a spare car battery in my cellar."

Rowan froze again, the words hitting them like sunlight after a week of storms. Their trembling slowed, just a little, replaced by sharp, brittle hope. They blinked, unsure if they heard correctly.

"You... what?" Their voice was hoarse, incredulous, almost childlike in its fragility.

Atticus gave a small shrug, just enough to make it casual, but there was a faint, embarrassed blush in the flush of his feathers. "I have a bit of a... habit," he said, voice softer now, almost conspiratorial. "I might be a bit of a hoarder. Not too bad... mostly just tinkering, tinkering and machinery. Always putting things together, *taking them apart*... seeing how they work. It's a little obsession, I admit. I have a cellar full of parts, bits of engines, Machines, electronics... stuff like that. I tend to keep things I might need. It's embarrassing, really, but... I've got spares. Batteries, tools, bits and bobs. So... yeah. There's one waiting for you. No strings attached. No favors needed. And definitely... no slaughtering required."

Rowan's eyes widened, mouth slightly ajar, breath hitching in disbelief. They couldn't process it at first. The sheer normalcy of it. The generosity. The simplicity of it. No twisting, no trap, no cruel psychological games. Just... kindness. Something real. Something tangible. A literal, functioning car battery that didn't come at the cost of another life.

Tears welled up again, slow and heavy, but this time there was no panic in them. No guilt. No horror. Just... relief. And gratitude. The sort that made your throat burn in a completely different way. Rowan's voice cracked as they whispered, almost incomprehensibly, "R-really?"

Atticus nodded, eyes gentle, a small, warm smile tugging at his beak. "Yep. All yours. Go on, take it. You've earned it."

Rowan's hands trembled as they set them in their lap, gripping the empty air as if they were holding that battery right there, right now. The tight coil of despair in their chest loosened just a fraction, a single thread of hope weaving itself into the tangle of trauma and bloodied memories.

They wanted to cry again, they wanted to collapse into the couch, to curl up, to laugh, to sob, to feel, and to not feel all at once. And for the first time in so long, Rowan felt... safe. Not entirely. Not forever. But safe enough to know that not everything was as twisted, as cruel, as relentless as Mojave.

"You... you really mean that?" Rowan managed, voice trembling but holding onto it like a lifeline.

"Absolutely," Atticus said softly, tilting his head. "No strings, no tricks. Just... a spare battery for someone who's had more than enough horror for one lifetime. You don't owe me a damn thing."

Rowan's chest tightened again, this time from relief, from shock, from the sudden, overwhelming flood of humanity offered without calculation. They blinked rapidly, throat tight, tears finally spilling freely, but they were different tears now.

"Thank you," they whispered, voice trembling but steady. "Really... thank you."

Atticus simply smiled, genuine, and Rowan felt, for the first time in what seemed like an eternity, that maybe they could breathe again. Maybe tomorrow could be something different. Maybe... it could be theirs.

Atticus's soft smile lingered in the room, warm and steady, as if it could counteract the desert sun itself. He leaned back, letting the quiet stretch a little longer, just letting Rowan absorb the impossibility of the moment, the first genuine kindness they'd felt in months. Then, after a pause that felt like a reprieve from the storm that was their life, he asked gently, "Do you want me to go get it now?"

Rowan froze, mind catching fire with desire and hesitation all at once. Of course they wanted it. Of course they wanted to escape the endless desert, Mojave's claws, the blood and the death that had become routine. The thought of leaving, of reclaiming some fraction of their life, of going somewhere safe... it was almost unbearable in its sweetness. Their lips parted to say yes, to leap at the promise of freedom, but then the reality of Mojave's reach clawed back in.

Atticus watches silently, patiently, as Rowan's mouth closes again, their chest rising and falling in uneven, shallow breaths. The thought that refuses to leave. If they leave, and if they don't kill Mojave or stop him somehow, he will inevitably come for Atticus. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe next week.

The certainty of it makes Rowan's stomach knot tighter than any fear of their own death. Rowan's body curls slightly against the couch, jacket bunched around them, damp sleeves clinging to skin from where their hands had been pressed to their face.

The wind rattles faintly against the windows. Somewhere in the kitchen, a spoon clinks, a minor, ghostly echo. For a moment, it's silent enough to almost pretend the world could stay quiet, just for a moment. Rowan imagines being able to breathe, to think, to feel... without Mojave, without blood, without the unending weight of what they've done.

But the fear doesn't let go. They can leave... but not knowing if Atticus will survive gnaws at them. Rowan's gaze drifts to Atticus, sitting across the room, calm and soft, holding that faint smile like it's a shield against the rest of the world. Rowan feels the impossible choice pressing into their chest, flee for themselves, or stay and risk it all for someone who has shown them genuine humanity. Their fingers curl into the fabric of the couch, white-knuckled, while their breathing shudders with indecision and guilt.

Finally, Rowan swallows hard, voice just a whisper, barely audible, "I... I don't know if I can just... leave you here." Their eyes flicker up to meet Atticus's, brimming with a mix of fear, exhaustion, and care they hadn't felt for anyone in ages. "What if... what if he comes? What if Mojave... what if he—"

Atticus leans forward, letting his tone remain soft, almost soothing, but layered with unspoken gravity. "Then we'll deal with him. But running scared won't solve anything, and it certainly won't fix what he's done to you. You've carried too much, too long. You deserve a break. And... I'll do what I can to protect this little corner of my life. That battery of yours? It's not just power. It's a chance to leave this nightmare behind. One step at a time, Rowan. That's all it takes."

Rowan swallows, trembling, heart hammering, chest tight, and for the first time, the thread of hope feels almost real enough to grasp. They nod faintly, almost imperceptibly, and the tension in their body eases fractionally. The fear doesn't vanish, how could it? but the thought of escape, the thought of leaving Mojave's shadow behind, flickers like a candle in the dark.

Rowan exhales slowly, voice small, raw, and cautious, "I... I want it. I want the battery."

Atticus's smile widens, gentle and unshakable. "Good. Then let's get it for you. No tricks. No blood. No more waiting." He rises slowly, each movement calm, the kind of unhurried motion Rowan realizes they haven't felt in months. Rowan watches him, still slumped, jacket pooled around them, eyes tracking the familiar, harmless rhythm of human, or.. in this case, owl, movement.

For a moment, the wind outside, the faint creaks of the cabin, the smell of tea and cinnamon, all of it weaves together into a fragile promise. Maybe, just maybe, there is a life past Mojave.

Maybe survival doesn't have to come with the weight of guilt and murder.

And Rowan lets themselves feel it, just for a heartbeat, before following Atticus toward the cellar, toward a spare battery, toward something that could very well be their first real choice in months.

Rowan's heart thumped, erratic and heavy in their chest, as they rose suddenly from the couch. "Wait," they called softly, voice trembling but insistent. Atticus froze mid-step, one hand on the basement doorframe. His gold eyes flicked to them, brow furrowing slightly in concern.

Rowan walked toward him slowly, shotgun gripped tightly but carefully, careful not to jostle it too much. When they were close enough, they extended it forward, hands shaking slightly.

“I... I don’t feel comfortable leaving you here alone,” Rowan said quietly, eyes flicking down, then back up, voice raw and earnest. “It... it would make me feel a lot better if you had this. Just... just in case. You know, if Mojave comes back. I... I’m not going to need it where I’m going. Not for the life I’m trying to get back. I want you to have it... you’re the one who needs protection here, not me.”

Atticus blinked, startled, his head tilting slightly as he regarded the weapon. His hand hovered uncertainly near it. “Oh... I don’t know,” he said hesitantly. “I’m not really the type to handle... this sort of thing. Firearms, violence, all that... not.. really my style.”

Rowan’s hands tightened on the stock of the shotgun, and their voice grew quieter, trembling with a mix of fear and insistence. “Please. I... I’m begging you. Just... just for emergencies. Only if someone comes here to hurt you. Nothing more. I... I can’t take it with me. I don’t want to. It’s... not for my future. But you... you might need it. Please.”

There was a long pause, the air thick with tension, the wind outside rattling faintly against the cabin. Atticus’s eyes softened, studying Rowan’s pleading face aged with exhaustion, the fragile humanity staring back at him. Then slowly, he exhaled, and the corners of his beak turned upward in a small, lopsided smile.

“All right,” he said gently, reaching forward to take the shotgun, the weight of it settling awkwardly in his wings. “But... I feel ridiculous holding this.” His voice had the faintest note of amusement, and he gave a half-shrug, feathers ruffling slightly. “Funny... not my usual type of thing to carry around, but... okay. Emergencies only.”

Rowan let out a shaky breath, relief flooding through them like warm water. “Thank you,” they whispered, voice barely audible, trembling, but lighter than it had been in days.

Atticus adjusted the stock under one wing, then turned toward the basement door, the shotgun held firmly now but with a surprising grace. “Well then,” he said, a small, teasing note in his voice to cut the tension, “let’s go get your shiny little battery, shall we?”

Rowan followed, still a little stiff from lingering fear and exhaustion, but their steps lighter now. They weren’t carrying the weight of death with them this time. Not here. Not anymore. And as Atticus opened the door to the basement, inviting them into the dimly lit cellar, Rowan felt just for a moment that maybe leaving Mojave’s shadow behind wasn’t impossible.

The basement stairs creaked softly beneath their weight as Rowan followed Atticus down, each step sinking them deeper into the earth, into the cool, dim underbelly of the cabin. The air changed almost immediately, colder, heavier, carrying the faint metallic tang of old dust and oil. A single bulb hung from the ceiling, swaying just slightly, casting long, distorted shadows that crawled along the concrete walls like something alive.

Rowan hugged their jacket closer around themselves, boots touching down on the basement floor with a dull thud. They blinked, eyes adjusting, scanning the space.

It... wasn’t what they expected.

Not a hoarder's den. Not chaos. Not piles of rusted machinery stacked to the ceiling. Just a few shelves lining the walls. A workbench. Tools neatly arranged, almost lovingly so. Too neat. Too intentional. The kind of order that didn't comfort, only unsettled.

"Huh," Rowan murmured before they could stop themselves. "This... isn't as bad as you said."

Atticus chuckled softly behind them, the sound oddly warm in the cold air. "Selective memory," he said lightly. "I tend to exaggerate my own flaws. Makes them easier to forgive."

Rowan nodded, though something in their chest tightened. Their eyes drifted around again, slower this time. The bulb flickered once.

Atticus lifted a wing and pointed toward the far end of the basement. "Battery's over there," he said. "Top shelf."

Rowan followed the gesture.

A shelf stood against the back wall, half in shadow. And sitting squarely in the center of it was a box. A present box. Festive paper. Red and green. A neat bow on top.

Rowan stopped walking. The silence thickened, pressing in around their ears. "...In the," they started, then swallowed, voice dropping. "In the... box?"

"Yes," Atticus replied easily. Too simply. Like as if it was normal to keep a Car battery conveniently gift wrapped for someone who Oh so desperately needed it. The air shifted. Rowan felt it in their bones before their mind caught up, the way prey knows when it's being watched.

They hesitated, then forced their legs to move. Every step toward the shelf felt heavier than the last, like wading through invisible water. *Don't be stupid*, they told themselves. It's just a box. People wrap things. He's weird. You knew that.

Still... a car battery?

Wrapped like a Christmas gift?

Rowan reached the shelf and lifted their hands toward the box.

Then they stopped.

Their eyes drifted, not to the present, but to the rest of the shelf.

Glass.

Jars.

Dozens of them.

Cloudy glass jars filled with murky liquid. Something floated inside one. Something wet and squishy.

Rowan's breath caught.

They leaned closer despite themselves, dread curling tight in their stomach. In one jar, something unmistakably heart-shaped bobbed gently. In another, long, ropey strands that might have been intestines. A third held something smaller. Compact and Delicate.

Human.

Their scalp prickled. Every hair on the back of their neck stood on end. Slowly, carefully, Rowan drew their hands back from the box, fingers trembling. Their heartbeat thundered in their ears, loud enough they were sure Atticus could hear it.

"Um..." Their voice came out thin. "Atticus?"

"Yes?" he answered, still calm. Still warm.

Rowan didn't turn around.

They stared at the jars, their reflection warped in the glass. They began to notice other things now. A bone saw tucked beneath the workbench. Stains on the floor that didn't quite wash out. Hooks embedded into the ceiling beams. Scratches on the concrete walls, deep and frantic, like something had tried to crawl away.

Their chest tightened. Breath shallow. Vision tunneling.

"There's..." Rowan swallowed hard. "...there's no car battery. Is there?"

...

The air went dead.

Not the comfortable kind of silence

Not the kind Atticus always gave them.

This silence was deliberate. Heavy. Predatory.

When Atticus spoke again, his voice was closer than Rowan expected. "You're very observant," he said quietly.

Rowan turned,

and pain exploded at the back of their head.

White-hot. Blinding. The world lurched violently as something heavy connected with their skull. A wet, cracking sound rang out. Their knees buckled, the floor rushing up to meet them

as their vision fractured into sparks and shadows. The last thing Rowan registered was the shotgun clattering to the ground, spinning uselessly across the concrete.

Then darkness swallowed everything. Not darkness. Not pain. Just... absence.

Rowan's thoughts dropped off a cliff and never hit the ground. There was no sense of time, no dreams to cling to, only the vague, distant awareness of something wrong. A feeling, not a memory. Pressure. Dragging. Their body pulled across something rough, scraping, jolting. Concrete biting into skin. The dull tug of gravity against limp limbs.

Then nothing again. A void that stretched and stretched, swallowing any attempt at thought. What went wrong? floated somewhere deep, unanswered.

When consciousness finally clawed its way back, it did so violently. Pain detonated behind Rowan's eyes, sharp and merciless, like their skull had been split open and stitched back together with barbed wire. They gasped and immediately regretted it, the air burned going in, their head pounding so hard it felt like their heartbeat was trying to escape through their ears.

Their vision swam. Shapes bled into one another. Light stabbed instead of illuminated. "Ah—fuck—" The sound came out hoarse, barely recognizable as their own.

They blinked, slow and heavy, lashes sticking together. The room came into focus inch by inch.

A single bulb flickered overhead, buzzing faintly, casting sickly yellow light that jumped and shuddered like it couldn't decide whether to stay on. The walls were close together and stained, scratched marks with old gouges and newer ones, layered over each other like panic had been carved into the plaster.

Rowan tried to move and felt something tug sharply at their ear.

Something tight, like pressure.

They reached up with a trembling hand and froze when their fingers brushed metal.

A tag.

Pierced clean through the top of their ear.

Their breath hitched. They stumbled upright, nearly retching as their head screamed in protest, and staggered toward a cracked mirror nailed crookedly to the wall. The reflection looking back at them was barely human, pale, eyes bloodshot, dried blood crusted in their hair.

And there it was.

A small, yellow tag. Plastic. Numbered.

Like livestock.

Like *property*.

“No...” The word slipped out, broken. “No, no, no—”

They backed away from the mirror and nearly tripped over the mattress, if you could even call it that. A thin, crumpled thing shoved into the corner of the room, stained dark with old spills that Rowan refused to identify. The floor around it was filthy, littered with trash, scraps of cloth, broken tools, and things that used to be something else.

Their stomach turned.

In the far corner sat a metal dog cage. Empty. The door slightly bent, like something inside it once had tried to get out.

Another corner held a barrel.

Rowan gagged.

Whatever was inside it had rotted beyond recognition. The smell was thick, sweet, nauseating. Flies buzzed lazily around the rim, crawling in and out like it was a feast. Rowan turned away before they could vomit, bile burning their throat.

Their heart was racing now, panic fully awake.

The room had one door. And another opening in the wall, but that one was barricaded, planks nailed crudely across it, wood splintered and reinforced as if whatever lay beyond had earned the barrier. Rowan stumbled toward the door, every step unsteady, vision tilting. Something white caught their eye.

A note.

Pinned at eye level.

Hands shaking, Rowan tore it down and read.

"There's no escape. Accept it.

If you try, my beasts will drag you back.

This cell is only temporary.

Soon you'll be moved and harvested daily until you expire.

Then there will be an end to it all.

I promise."

The words blurred as tears flooded their eyes.

Harvested.

Daily.

Expire.

Rowan's knees buckled, their back hitting the wall as they slid down to the floor, paper crumpling in their fist. Their body shook violently now, breath coming in sharp, broken gasps.

They had hoped, stupidly.. that this was a mistake. That maybe Mojave had found them. That somehow, in some fucked-up twist, this was him again.

But no.

This was worse.

So much worse.

Because Mojave had never pretended to be kind.

Atticus had smiled at them.

Made them tea. Fed them. Listened. Laughed softly when Rowan ate too fast. Told jokes. Made them feel, just for a moment.. like they weren't a monster. Like they deserved care. Like maybe there was still a version of the world where gentleness existed.

Rowan had wanted to protect him. They'd given him the shotgun. The realization hit like a second blow to the head, knocking the air from their lungs.

"Oh my god..." Rowan whispered, hysteria bubbling up fast. "I'm so *fucking* stupid." The sound cracked into something raw and animal.

They clawed at their hair, fingers digging into their scalp as if they could rip the thoughts out along with it. Tears streamed down their face, hot and relentless, splashing onto the filthy floor.

"Fuck!" they screamed, voice echoing off the walls. "FUCK—FUCK—FUCK!"

Again and again, the word tore out of them, each time louder, more broken, until their throat burned and their chest ached. Rage twisted with grief, betrayal slicing deeper than any blade Mojave had ever pressed into their hands.

"This was supposed to be different!" Rowan sobbed, slamming their palm against the wall. "You made me feel good—you asshole—YOU MADE ME BELIEVE YOU!" Their scream dissolved into a hoarse, strangled sound, body folding in on itself as the weight of it all finally crushed down. They curled forward, hands covering their face, shoulders shaking violently.

Hope had been dangled in front of them.

And ripped away.

Not with cruelty.

With kindness.

And that hurt more than anything else ever had. Rowan sat there for a long time after the screaming stopped. Not because they were calm, but because there was nothing left to come out.

Their throat burned raw, lungs aching, head throbbing in vicious, pulsing waves. Every heartbeat echoed in their skull, syncing cruelly with the dull buzz of the flickering light above. The room felt closer now, tighter, like it was slowly leaning in to watch them break.

And then the thought crept in.

Quiet. Poisonous..

Mojave was right.

The realization didn't come like a scream. It came like a whisper that slid straight under their ribs and twisted. Rowan's hands slowly dropped from their face. Their fingers were shaking, knuckles white, nails caked with grime and dried blood that still never seemed to wash off, no matter how many times they scrubbed.

"I chose him," Rowan muttered hoarsely. Their voice sounded wrong in the room. Smaller. "I chose to believe him." They let out a weak, humorless laugh that collapsed halfway through. It scraped out of their chest like something dying.

They had been so desperate to hate Mojave, so desperate to believe that someone else in this desert had to be better, that they'd swallowed every word Atticus fed them like it was salvation.

Mojave had warned them. Not gently. Never gently. But clearly. And he made it pretty fucking clear too.

Can't be trusted.

Perverted..

And Mojave didn't just tell them too, Atticus himself did as well. How could they be so stupid and look past all the red flags Atticus said?

Always putting things together, taking them apart... seeing how they work.

Fuck.

How could they not raise a brow when he said he and Mojave used to *dine* together? It all made fucking sense now, and Rowan only felt more stupid for it.

Rowan squeezed their eyes shut, jaw trembling. “He told me,” they whispered, rage rising hot and sharp beneath the despair. “He fucking told me.”

And the worst part, the part that made their stomach churn, was knowing Mojave was probably thrilled by this. Because this wasn’t just punishment.

This was proof.

Proof that Rowan’s judgment was flawed. That their hope was stupid. That kindness was a lie people wore like skin. The room seemed to hum louder as that truth settled in.

Rowan pushed themselves up unsteadily, legs weak, and staggered around the cell. Every step felt wrong, off-balance, like their body hadn’t fully come back to them yet.

They tested the door.

Solid. Reinforced. Metal bolted into concrete. They rattled it harder, desperation flaring again, but it didn’t budge. Not even a sympathetic creak. The barricaded passageway caught their eye next.

They approached it slowly, dread crawling up their spine. The wooden planks were thick, nailed in haphazardly, splintered at the edges. Deep scratch marks marred the wood, gouges that told a story Rowan didn’t want to finish in their head. Something had tried to get through.

Something had failed.

Rowan stepped back, heart hammering, and nearly tripped over the dog cage again. This time, they stopped and stared at it. The bars were bent inward.

Their breath hitched.

“No,” Rowan whispered. “No, no, no...”

They backed away from it, panic threatening to rise again, and collapsed onto the stained mattress instead. The thing sagged under their weight, releasing a sour, damp smell that made their eyes water. They curled in on themselves instinctively, knees pulled to their chest, arms wrapped tight like they could hold themselves together by force alone.

Time stretched.

Minutes blurred into hours, or maybe seconds. The flickering light never stopped, never gave them the mercy of darkness. Every buzz felt like it vibrated inside their skull.

Rowan’s thoughts spiraled. They imagined Mojave finding out. That smug, slow-blinking stare. The way his stump tail would flick lazily as he said something awful and true.

Told you so.

The thought made Rowan's hands curl into fists. "*I hate* you," they whispered, not sure who it was for anymore. Mojave. Atticus. The desert. Themselves. Their gaze drifted back to the tag in the cracked mirror.

A number.

No name.

They reached up and touched it gently. Pain flared, sharp and immediate, and they hissed through clenched teeth, but they didn't pull their hand away. "They really did it," Rowan murmured. "They really turned me into... this."

Property.

Inventory.

Meat waiting its turn.

Something inside them hardened then, not hope, not courage, but something colder. Anger without fire. A quiet, dangerous resolve born from being proven right for all the wrong reasons.

If Mojave was right about Atticus...

Then maybe Mojave was right about the desert, too.

That it didn't forgive.

That it didn't reward kindness.

That survival came from teeth, not trust.

Rowan leaned back against the wall, staring at the flickering bulb until their eyes burned.

Their body was trapped.

Their mind was fractured and furious, but still theirs.

And somewhere deep beneath the betrayal and despair, a single thought refused to die,

I stopped once.

I chose not to pull the trigger.

And even here, tagged, caged, waiting to be harvested, that choice still mattered.

The room didn't care. Atticus didn't care.

But Rowan did.

And for now... that would have to be enough.

 Hieronymus Fanart

Chapter End Notes

I hope this chapter is okay. I'm worried if it was losing some "oomph" or whatever halfway through. I just finished the Hieronymus fanart and I'm pretty proud of it!! I think out of everything I've ever drew, this is the most detailed, high quality, best piece of art I've ever made. I've never made anything quite like it!

I also finished the fanart of Atticus too! If you want to see it, i'll be uploading all the fanart to my Instagram and i'll be tagging StarGazers studio!

My art Instagram is: Misster Goreistic

Chapter 13: Harvest

Chapter Summary

Atticus is preparing you for harvest, torturing and dehumanizing the main character

Chapter Notes



Torture, forced submission, abuse, dehumanization, claustrophobia

Time became viscous.

It didn't move forward so much as it pooled.

Rowan lay on the stained mattress with their arms folded tight over their chest, staring up at the flickering bulb. Every buzz of electricity felt like a pulse in their skull. Their head still throbbed where the shotgun stock had struck them, a deep, nauseating ache that made their vision blur whenever they moved too fast.

They counted their breaths at first. Then the drips. Something somewhere leaked, water, maybe. Or something else. It hit metal with a hollow *plink... plink... plink* that echoed too loudly in the small room. Rowan counted those instead. Lost count. Started again.

They slept in short, ugly bursts. Not rest, never rest. Just blackouts. Each time they woke, their mouth tasted like copper and rot. Their stomach cramped painfully, empty and burning. The smell in the room never faded. It clung to their skin, their hair, the inside of their lungs.

Eventually, footsteps.

Not hurried. Not sneaking. Unhurried. Casual.

The door scraped open.

Warm Light spilled in from the hallway, almost domestic. It didn't belong down here. It felt obscene.

Atticus stepped in.

He looked... exactly the same. Clean. Calm. Soft-eyed. Glasses perched neatly on his beak. White blouse unwrinkled, sleeves rolled just so. He carried a shallow metal bowl in both hands like he was bringing breakfast to a guest.

Rowan sat up slowly, muscles screaming in protest.

Atticus smiled.

"There you are," he said gently. "You're awake."

Rowan didn't answer.

Atticus glanced at the tag in their ear, reading it like a name badge.

"...Good."

He set the bowl down on the concrete floor.

Rowan's stomach twisted at the smell. It was food. Technically. Pale chunks. Grainy mash. Something vegetal underneath it. It smelled like damp hay and iron.

"Go on," Atticus said pleasantly. "Eat."

Rowan stared at the bowl. Then at him.

"I'm not a fucking animal."

The smile didn't falter. Atticus tilted his head. "Harvest talks already? That's fast."

Rowan's jaw clenched. "I have a name."

Atticus's eyes flicked to the tag again.

"No," he said simply. "You have a number."

Rowan pushed themselves to their feet, swaying slightly. Their legs barely held them, but they stood anyway. Stubborn. Spiteful.

"I'm not eating that shit."

...

Atticus exhaled slowly through his nose. A soft sound. Almost disappointed. "You misunderstand," he said. "I *wasn't* asking."

Rowan laughed, a broken tired sharp laugh. "What are you gonna do? Kill me?"

That finally did something.

Atticus stepped closer. Up close, Rowan could see it, the difference. The eyes weren't warm. They were curious. Appraising. The way someone looks at an animal that's acting

unpredictably.

Death, Atticus decided, would be too kind. He reached out and grabbed Rowan's face.

Not roughly at first. Just firm. Fingers digging into their jaw, claws pressing into skin, forcing their head up. Rowan hissed in pain, hands flying up instinctively, but Atticus tightened his grip immediately, strength shocking in its suddenness.

"Listen carefully," he said, voice still calm. "If you starve, your body eats itself. That makes the meat stringy. Bitter. Ruined." His thumb pressed into Rowan's cheek until their mouth opened slightly. "If you fight, you bruise. Bruises have to be cut away."

Rowan spat.

Right into his face.

It was a petty impulse, they didn't think twice before doing it. For half a second, nothing happened.

Atticus blinked.

"Hm," he hummed, a low, thoughtful sound. "...Well," he said quietly. "That answers that."

The next moment was a blur.

The world tilted violently as Atticus slammed Rowan down onto the concrete. Pain exploded through their shoulder, their ribs, their head. Before they could even scream, a heavy knee pinned their back, grinding them flat.

"On all fours," Atticus snapped.

Rowan tried to push up. Tried to twist.

Atticus kicked the back of their knee.

Hard.

Rowan cried out as they collapsed forward, palms slapping the filthy floor. The smell hit them full-force. Their stomach lurched.

Atticus grabbed a fistful of their hair and yanked their head down toward the bowl. "Eat," he said, no warmth left now. "Or I'll feed you myself."

Rowan shook, breath coming in ragged gasps. Rage burned through the fear, still recklessly defiant. "Go to hell," they spat. "I hope Mojave guts you—"

Atticus slammed their face down.

Food smeared across their mouth. Their nose. Their cheek. The taste was awful, bland and rancid at the same time. Rowan gagged, choking, tears spilling freely now.

“Harvest does *not* speak,” Atticus said sharply. “Harvest *consumes*.” He held them there until their arms shook, until the hunger won. Until survival crawled up from somewhere ugly and primitive and forced their mouth to open.

Rowan ate.

Not because they wanted to. Because their body betrayed them. Because death wasn’t the worst thing anymore.

When the bowl was empty, Atticus finally released them. Rowan collapsed sideways, sobbing silently, curling into themselves on the floor. Every inch of them burned with shame and fury.

Atticus straightened his blouse. He crouched once more, adjusting the tag in Rowan’s ear, making it sting. “You’ll learn,” he said calmly. “They always do.”

Then he turned and left, locking the door behind him.

The light flickered.

Rowan lay there shaking, face pressed to concrete, the taste of feed still in their mouth.

Mojave had hurt them.

But Atticus was dehumanizing them. And that.. was so, so much worse.

The light never turned off.

It flickered all night, buzzing, flicking shadows across the walls, so Rowan never truly slept. Every time their eyes closed, their body jolted awake again, convinced Atticus had come back. The concrete was cold beneath them. Their joints ached from being forced onto all fours for too long, muscles locked in defensive tension even after there was nothing left to fight.

The next day.

Morning didn’t arrive so much as announce itself.

Footsteps again. Same measured pace. Same lack of urgency.

The door opened.

Rowan didn’t look up this time. They stayed curled on their side, cheek pressed to the floor, hair tangled and stiff with dried food and sweat. Their throat felt raw. Their stomach burned, half hunger, half nausea.

Atticus stepped in carrying two things.

A bucket and a length of rope.

“Up,” he said.

Rowan didn’t move.

Atticus waited.

Seconds stretched. Then minutes, then finally, Rowan muttered hoarsely,

“Kill me or get it over with.”

Atticus sighed. Not angry. Just... inconvenienced.

He crossed the room and nudged Rowan with his foot, not hard, just enough to roll them onto their back. He crouched, peering down at them like a vet examining a stubborn animal. “You still think death is the worst outcome,” he said softly. “That’s very human of you.”

Rowan glared at him through swollen eyes. “I won’t be your fucking—”

The rope came down around their neck. Not striking, pinning. Atticus pulled it against their throat just enough to steal breath, just enough to make their vision sparkle at the edges. “*No*,” he corrected calmly. “You won’t be anything of mine. You’re inventory.” He released the pressure and stood again.

“Up.”

This time, Rowan forced themselves to move. Slowly. Shakily. Every instinct screamed not to obey, but the memory of the concrete, the bowl, the way hunger had betrayed them... it all crushed that rebellion before it could take shape. They pushed themselves onto hands and knees.

Atticus nodded approvingly.

“Good.”

He removed the rope around their neck, and looped it around their torso like a lead, like you would a harness an animal. Degrading. Worse than pain. “Today,” he continued conversationally, lifting the bucket, “we’re establishing routine.”

The bucket tipped.

Cold liquid splashed over Rowan’s back and shoulders. They gasped. The smell hit a second later, stale water and something chemical underneath. It soaked into their clothes, trickled down their spine, pooled beneath their hands.

Atticus watched carefully.

“You flinch too much,” he observed. “Animals don’t flinch like that once they’re trained.”

Rowan's hands shook violently as they tried to steady themselves. Rage bubbled up again, hot and desperate.

"I'm not an animal..." they whispered.

Atticus paused.

For just a second, his expression shifted, not to anger, not in irritation, but something closer to amusement. He hummed softly, head tilting as he studied Rowan like a puzzle piece finally clicking into place.

"Funny," he said.

He stepped closer, looming now, blocking what little light there was.

"You show up at my doorstep wearing deer," he continued mildly, voice almost warm. "Skin on your hands. Blood under your nails. Eyes full of innocence and that pathetic hesitation when you couldn't pull the trigger on me." His gaze dragged slowly over Rowan's shaking form.

"You're more deer than actual deer," Atticus murmured.

Rowan's stomach twisted.

Atticus leaned down, close enough that Rowan could smell the tea on his breath again. "It's almost poetic," he went on. "Like Mojave knew exactly what he was doing. Sending you here wrapped in deer skin, trembling and soft. An unopened present. Still warm. Still breathing. He knows what I like, *too*."

A faint smile curved his beak.

"And I do so love *unwrapping* things slowly.."

Rowan's breath shuddered, a chill crawling up their spine.

Atticus crouched in front of them, level with their face. "Say the number," he instructed.

Rowan swallowed. "No."

Atticus reached out and twisted the tag in their ear hard.

Pain exploded through Rowan's head. They cried out despite themselves, hands flying up, only for Atticus to kick them back down onto the floor.

"Say it."

Rowan's breath came in wet, broken gasps. Tears blurred their vision.

"...I—"

"Say. *The*. **Number**."

“...Seven-four eight,” Rowan sobbed.

Atticus smiled.

“Good,” he said. “See? You’re learning.”

He stood and gestured toward the cage in the corner, the small metal one Rowan had tried not to look at.

“Inside.”

Rowan stared at it, horror freezing them in place. “It’s too small.”

Atticus tilted his head. “So are deer stalls.”

Rowan didn’t move.

Atticus didn’t raise his voice. Didn’t threaten. He simply walked over, grabbed the rope, and dragged them. Concrete scraped skin. Rowan screamed, nails clawing uselessly at the floor. Atticus didn’t stop until he shoved them bodily into the cage, forcing their limbs to fold in awkward, painful angles.

The door slammed shut. Metal clicked.

Rowan lay there gasping, knees pressed to chest, ribs screaming with every breath. The cage smelled like rust and old fear.

Atticus crouched in front of it, eye level again. “This is not punishment,” he said gently. “This is correction. You resisted feeding. You spoke out of turn. So you lose space.”

Rowan shook violently, whispering, “Y-You’re worse than *him*.”

Atticus considered that. Then he smiled wider.

“I *know*.”

He stood, turned off the overhead light, and left Rowan in darkness broken only by the faint glow from the hallway beyond the door. As the lock clicked shut, his voice drifted back one last time,

“Tomorrow, we’ll work on posture.”

The silence afterward was suffocating. Rowan curled tighter in the cage, body aching, mind screaming.

Mojave had wanted to evolve Rowan. Atticus wanted to erase them. And somewhere deep inside, beneath the terror and humiliation, Rowan realized something even worse,

Atticus wasn’t rushing. This was only day two.

The cage stayed dark.

Not merciful dark, never that. It was pitch black dark to the point where closing your eyes made no difference, but the cage was so tight, it made them feel like they were buried underground and slowly being crushed by the weight of dirt all around them, enough to make them feel claustrophobic. Rowan wasn't even claustrophobic, never was, never have been, but even they panicked once or twice when the realization of how little space there was.

Hours passed. Maybe.

Rowan stopped trusting time almost immediately.

Their legs cramped first. Knees locked too tightly to their chest, muscles trembling as they tried to shift without hitting the bars. Every movement scraped skin or pressed bruises into metal. The cage was built to contain, not to rest. There was no position that didn't hurt. No angle that didn't punish.

The tag in their ear throbbed relentlessly, each pulse of pain syncing with their heartbeat, an unwanted metronome counting out their existence in this place. They breathed shallow. Quiet. Afraid that even the sound of breathing might be wrong somehow.

This... this was new.

Mojave had hurt them. God, Mojave had destroyed them in ways Rowan still couldn't fully name. The hunts. The tub. The water filling their lungs. The moment everything went black and then nothing. Death, technically. A few seconds of it. Enough to haunt every bath, every sink, every rainstorm afterward.

Mojave had forced them to eat things they still tasted in nightmares. Jane Doe's venison, meat that used to have a name, a face, a history Rowan hadn't been allowed to forget. The family of three. The cult in the church, blood soaking into pews while hymns echoed like mockery. Mojave was violence. Mojave was chaos. Mojave was cruelty worn openly, like a blade held at throat level so you always knew where it was.

But even Mojave had...

Rowan swallowed hard.

Even *Mojave* had let them sleep on a couch. A couch. Torn cushions. Stained fabric. But soft. Horizontal. Human.

Even Mojave had let them shower. Hot water burning filth and blood from their skin. Steam fogging the mirror so they didn't have to see themselves. Even Mojave had tossed them a beer once, wordlessly, like a fucked-up peace offering. Even Mojave had dragged them out of that maze and saved their life from the scarecrow when he didn't have to.

Mojave ruined their life.

Atticus wanted to take it away.

Rowan pressed their forehead against their knees, breath hitching as the realization settled heavier than the cage itself.

This wasn't about obedience.

This was about definition.

Atticus wasn't trying to break Rowan into compliance. He was stripping away the category of "person" entirely piece by piece, ritual by ritual. Name first. Then posture. Then space. Then speech. Until all that was left was something that could be handled, stored, harvested.

Inventory.

Their stomach growled painfully, the sound loud in the confined space. Rowan flinched at their own body, betrayed by its needs. Hunger had already humiliated them once. It would again. They knew it. Atticus knew it.

That was the point.

Their mind replayed his words,

Say the number.

Rowan squeezed their eyes shut, teeth chattering. Their thoughts skidded helplessly, circling the same realization again and again until it burned,

They had trusted the wrong monster. They had chosen wrong. Mojave had warned them.

Mojave had said Atticus couldn't be trusted. Had said the softness was a lie. Had said some predators didn't need to chase, they waited, smiling, until prey walked right up to the door on their own.

Rowan had hated Mojave too much to listen, and now they were here, tagged and caged like livestock.

At some point, exhaustion won once more. Falling into a heavy, dissociative fog. Rowan stared through the bars, eyes unfocused, breathing shallow, body shaking intermittently as cramps rolled through them in dull waves.

They wondered if Mojave knew.

If this had been intentional. If the deer skin, the path, the cabin.. it had all been a handoff. A transaction between monsters.

The thought hurt worse than the cage.

When footsteps finally returned hours later or days, Rowan couldn't tell, their body reacted before their mind did. Muscles seized. Heart slammed against ribs. Breath caught painfully in their throat.

The lock clicked.

The door opened. Light spilled in.

Rowan didn't flinch. They didn't move at all. Not because they'd learned the schedule, there wasn't one, but because their body had begun tracking patterns the way trapped things do. Sound. Hunger. Pain. The rhythm of survival stripping thought down to its ugliest basics. They stayed curled in the cage, eyes glassy, chest rising and falling too fast, waiting, not for rescue, not for mercy, but for the next rule to be introduced. Because now they understood something terrible and undeniable,

Mojave had treated them like a person he wanted to break.

Atticus was treating them like an animal he intended to keep.

They stayed curled tight, spine pressed to the bars, eyes open but unfocused, breath shallow and sharp. Their muscles ached constantly now, not the fresh pain of injury, but the deep, sour ache of starvation and immobility. Their stomach burned hollow, clawing inward on itself.

Atticus stood just outside the cage, clipboard tucked under one arm.

A clipboard.

The sight of it made Rowan's throat tighten.

"Morning," he said mildly, as if this were a routine visit to a barn.

Rowan didn't answer.

Atticus waited, eyes drifting lazily over them, assessing. Not seeing. Assessing.

"You're quieter today," he observed. "That's good. Quiet animals conserve energy."

Rowan's jaw tightened. Their fingers curled into the metal beneath them.

Atticus unlocked the cage. The door creaked open.

"Out," he said.

Rowan didn't move.

Atticus sighed softly, not irritated, not angry. Patient. He set the clipboard down against the wall, crouched, and reached in. His hand closed around Rowan's ankle.

The touch sent a jolt of panic through them like electricity.

Rowan kicked.

Their heel caught Atticus in the shoulder, not hard, not enough to hurt, but enough to disrupt his calm. For a fraction of a second, something flickered behind his eyes.

Then it vanished.

"Careful," he said gently. "That's unnecessary."

He *yanked*.

Rowan's body slid out of the cage, skin scraping painfully along the bars. They hit the concrete with a sharp, breathless sound, limbs tangling awkwardly beneath them. Before they could scramble back, Atticus pressed a boot between their shoulder blades and kept them there.

Not crushing. Just pinning.

"On your feet," he said.

Rowan pushed themselves up, shaking violently. Their legs nearly gave out. The room tilted. Black spots swam across their vision.

Atticus steadied them with one hand, businesslike, detached, keeping them upright just long enough for the dizziness to pass.

"Still responsive," he murmured, almost to himself. He guided them, half-supporting, half-directing toward a scale set against the wall. Industrial. Rusted. The kind meant for livestock.

Rowan stared at it, heart pounding.

"No," they said hoarsely.

Atticus ignored them.

"Step on."

"I *said* no."

Atticus tilted his head. "You said a lot of things yesterday."

He gripped Rowan's arm, not violently, but firmly, and maneuvered them onto the scale. Rowan's knees buckled slightly as the cold metal bit into the soles of their feet. They swayed, barely upright.

The scale creaked. The needle jumped. Then settled.

Atticus leaned in to read it.

He didn't frown. He didn't look surprised. But something in his posture shifted, calculating.

"Hm," he said. "That's lower than anticipated."

Rowan laughed weakly. It came out cracked and ugly. "What, not enough meat on the bones yet?"

Atticus straightened slowly.

"No," he replied. "Too much loss too fast. If you drop any further, quality degrades."

Rowan stared at him.

That word.

Quality.

“You’re underweight,” Atticus continued calmly. “Significantly. Muscle mass depletion, dehydration, stress response burning calories you don’t have to spare.” He picked up the clipboard and made a note. “We’ll need to adjust intake.”

Rowan spat at his feet.

The saliva barely made it past their toes.

Atticus looked down at it, ignored it, then back at Rowan.

“Temperament’s still poor,” he noted. “But that’s expected.” He guided Rowan off the scale and sat them down hard against the wall. Rowan slid down, too weak to stay upright, head lolling back as they sucked in shaky breaths.

Atticus disappeared for a moment. When he returned, he carried a large metal bowl.

The familiar smell hit Rowan immediately.

It was the same Grainy feed as before. Something cooked but not seasoned. Thick. Heavy. Animal feed masquerading as food.

Rowan gagged. “No,” they said again, shaking their head. “I’m not eating that again”

Atticus set the bowl down on the floor. “Increased portions,” he said. “You’ll need it.”

“I’d rather starve.”

Atticus crouched in front of them, face level, studying Rowan with clinical interest.

“That’s not an option,” he replied. “Starvation is inefficient.”

Rowan’s lips curled into a weak, defiant sneer. “Then force it down my throat.”

...

Atticus considered that.

Then he smiled faintly.

“Oh,” he simply said.

He stood and stepped back, gesturing to the bowl.

“Eat.”

Rowan stayed still.

Minutes passed.

Their stomach twisted violently, hunger screaming louder than pride. The smell of the food crawled into their nose, thick and unavoidable. Their body leaned toward it instinctively before their mind could stop it.

They caught themselves. “No,” Rowan whispered.

Atticus watched the internal war play out with quiet fascination. “You’re still thinking like a person,” he said. “Standing like one. Owning standards like one. That will fade.”

Rowan lifted their head, eyes burning. “I’m still me.”

Atticus tilted his head slightly.

“No,” he corrected. “You’re still resisting.”

He stepped closer.

“You don’t need to be compliant,” he added. “You just need to be functional.”

Rowan’s hands trembled violently into fists, keeping themselves upright, keeping themselves away from the bowl. “I won’t crawl,” they said. “I won’t—”

Atticus moved fast. Not frantically though, not angry. But Efficient.

He grabbed Rowan by the shoulders and shoved them forward. Rowan’s palms slapped the concrete. Their knees hit hard, pain shooting up their legs. Before they could react, Atticus pressed down between their shoulder blades again, forcing their spine into an animal hunch.

“*Posture*,” he said calmly. “You’ll learn.”

Rowan thrashed weakly, fury and humiliation tearing a sound out of their chest that wasn’t quite a scream.

“Get up,” they gasped. “I’m not—”

Atticus grabbed a fistful of their hair and forced their head down.

“Eat,” he said.

Rowan clenched their teeth, shaking violently.

Atticus waited. Seconds stretched.

Rowan’s body betrayed them.

Their head dipped. Their mouth opened.

The first bite tasted like ash and shame and survival.

Tears streamed down their face as they chewed, choking, sobbing around mouthfuls they swore they'd begrudgingly had before. Their hands stayed planted on the floor, but moved instinctively to the bowl.

"No." Atticus quickly smacked their hands away, "Use only your mouth." He demanded.

And so Rowan did.

Atticus watched the entire time.

When Rowan finally gagged, empty and shaking, he straightened.

"Better," he said, leaning upward. He made another note on the clipboard.

Then, almost thoughtfully, he added, "Tomorrow, we'll re-weigh you."

He turned off the light as he left.

Rowan collapsed onto their side, body wracked with sobs they couldn't stop, stomach full and spirit shredded.

They had survived another day.

And Atticus had already planned the next one.

Rowan lay on the thin, grimy mattress, the last vestiges of the day's shame and hunger settling into their bones like a permanent ache. Atticus hadn't put them back in the cage, not yet, and for that they were... cautiously grateful. Not grateful in the way of comfort or safety, but grateful in the tiny, desperate way one clings to a shadow of dignity when everything else is stripped away.

The mattress was hard, uneven, and smelled faintly of metal and rot. They had tried to curl up, to hide, to shut down into some semblance of unconsciousness, but the world outside, the endless hum of the flickering basement light, the acrid odor of the other nearby "stock" in their cells, never let them fully rest. Sleep was a shallow trickle, slipping in and out like water through the cracks in a stone floor. Every time they closed their eyes, images of the deer, Jane Doe, John Doe, the cult members, the blood and the screams, returned to the forefront. Every act, every murder, every violation of their own conscience replayed with relentless clarity.

They had tried to rationalize it. Maybe this, this cage, this room, this existence, was some sort of punishment. Some divine reckoning for what they'd done. For the lives they'd taken under Mojave's command. Maybe God or whatever deity watched over things, had decreed this was their penance. But the thought offered no relief, only a deeper, gnawing fear... did they even deserve to live? Could someone who had been made to kill and kill again ever be anything but monstrous?

Mojave always said yes. And now...

Atticus seemed to say yes too, though in a far crueler, more intimate way.

Chapter 14: Twilight Time

Chapter Summary

Atticus had enough

Chapter Notes



Torture, abuse, forced submission, bodily mutilation

Hours passed like this. Time had no meaning. They drifted in and out of consciousness, thoughts dissolving into feverish nightmares that never fully released them.

Then, footsteps.

Rowan's eyes snapped open.

Atticus.

He had returned.

No announcement this time, no soft tones. Just the sound of his boots drawing closer and the metal creak of the door opening. The quiet hum of the flickering light above cut through the darkness like a blade. Rowan pulled themselves up on trembling arms, trying to make themselves smaller, trying to disappear, but the instinct was useless. Atticus moved too quickly.

He crouched, examining them. Clipboard in one hand, expression calm but sharp, the quiet intensity of a predator sizing up its prey.

"I want to check your teeth today," he said mildly. "Routine. Health. Stock must be maintained."

Rowan froze.

"You're not... human," he added casually, eyes scanning their face. "But you still bite."

Rowan's mind raced. They were hungry, cornered, and cornered again, but fury still smoldered like a live coal in their chest.

Atticus reached out to check their teeth, feathered fingers grazing their jaw. He inserted a small dental oral mirror stick into Rowan's mouth, checking the back of their teeth too, using one thumb to spread their mouth further apart, deeper.

Rowan hesitated, feeling his thumb next to their molars. Before they could think twice, their defiance snapped. They bit down on his thumb, not hard enough to pierce bone, but enough to make Atticus recoil just slightly.

For a heartbeat, the world seemed to freeze.

Atticus blinked, startled. That had not been anticipated. A hiss of pain left his beak, low and quiet, more amused than angry... until it wasn't.

Then, the hand that had been inspecting their teeth came down hard on their face, smacking them to the concrete floor with a sickening thud. Pain shot through Rowan's ribs, and the taste of blood coated their mouth.

"Do you think that's clever?" Atticus said, voice low, calm, but there was a cold edge beneath the softness, a danger that made Rowan's stomach twist in terror.

Before Rowan could react, Atticus grabbed a thick metal chain from where it rested against his hip. It rattled as he lifted it, and the sound alone made Rowan's heart hammer. He looped it around Rowan's neck, the cold bite of steel against their skin sending a jolt of panic straight to their spine.

Rowan gasped, trying to pull back, but Atticus tightened the chain just enough to steal their breath. Not to kill. Not yet. Just enough to remind them where they were, what they were now.

"You're stock," he whispered, dragging them forward by the chain. "Nothing more. Less than human. You think this is pain? This is correction. Conditioning, really."

Rowan's limbs scraped against the concrete floor, the chain clinking like sinister music. They stumbled past rooms lined with other cages.

The screams.

The whines.

Other humanoid animals, twisted and broken, some pressed to the bars, some dislocated in positions that made Rowan's stomach churn. One's arm hung at an impossible angle, another's leg bent backward. Eyes hollow, mouths open in silent screams. Each of them a warning, a mirror of what Rowan could become, all begging to be killed already.

"See?" Atticus said softly, voice soothing yet terrifying. "All stock. All inventory. All... you, eventually."

Rowan tried to cry out, to resist, but the metal chain cut into their throat. They gagged, eyes watering, vision swimming. Their body was alive with adrenaline, fear twisting every nerve into a tight knot.

The chain led them into the back of the basement, the “butchering room” as it smelled before they even fully saw it.

The room was cold, sterile, and shining with blood-dark steel. Instruments hung like grotesque ornaments. A chair sat in the center, straps dangling like open arms waiting for a victim. Multiple cameras stood at each corner, lens pointed directly at the chair, cold and mechanical.

“Seat,” Atticus instructed.

Rowan panicked. They planted their hands on the doorframe, leaning backward, trying to resist. Every instinct screamed to run, to pull away, to fight.

Atticus stepped forward calmly, adjusting the chain with a faint clink, yanking Rowan back with precise force. “No,” he said. “You’re not running. You’re here. You’re inventory.”

Rowan tried to kick, to swing, but Atticus moved like liquid, impossible to grab. The chain tightened. Rowan choked on the cold metal, gagging. Their lungs burned.

Atticus pressed them down into the chair, straps slamming into place around their wrists, ankles, chest, holding them pinned.

“Posture,” he murmured, ensuring their spine arched unnaturally, forcing them to be both vulnerable and compliant.

Rowan’s head thrashed violently, but the straps cut them off. Every limb restrained. Every muscle screaming. Every breath a labor.

Then Atticus reached into a cabinet, pulling out a small set of deer antlers. Smooth, polished, sharp. They were tiny, probably from a young deer, but meant for attachment, for decoration, for... something worse.

Rowan’s heart hammered against their ribs. Fear and adrenaline merged into a cold, frantic clarity. They realized, in that moment, that this, whatever Atticus intended.. would be worse than anything Mojave had done. Mojave had been violent, yes. Cruel, yes. But at least Mojave let them breathe, let them sleep, gave them couches, food. Atticus had none of those decencies. *None*.

Rowan tried to struggle again, jerking their head away, fists slamming against the leather straps.

Then, unexpectedly, a crackle from a small old record player echoed through the room. The soft, nostalgic strains of “*Twilight Time*” by *The Platters* floated in the dim light. Atticus’s deep, calm voice joined in, humming along to the melody as if nothing in the world could disturb his amusement.

“Heavenly shades of night are falling, its Twilight Time...”

Rowan’s ears rang with the sound, the sweetness of the song grotesquely at odds with the terror in the room. Their whole body tensed instinctively, muscles locked, fingers clawing at

the leather restraints. Each note felt like it punctured their chest, each line like it carved a groove into their skull.

Atticus leaned closer, humming softly, the song's slow rhythm contradicted with the harshness of the basement's cold air.

Rowan's chest heaved violently, every muscle locked in tension. Their limbs strained against the leather straps, but there was no escape. The antlers in Atticus's hands glinted coldly under the flickering light, cruel and deliberate, and Rowan's mind screamed in panic. "W.. What the fuck are you doing??"

But Atticus didn't answer. Instead, he continued to hum along to the lyrics as he put the antlers aside, grabbing a drill with a sharp metal cone drill bit at the end of it, already stained with blood.

"Out of the mist, your voice is calling 'tis twilight time."

The first touch was deliberate. Atticus' gloved hands gripped Rowan's head tightly as he slowly, agonizingly forced the drill bits tip into their skull. The sharp twisting point pierced the flesh, drawing beads of crimson blood that promptly welled up and began to trickle down Rowan's forehead.

The pain was unlike anything they had ever experienced, a white-hot, searing, mind-numbing agony that seemed to set their very skull on fire.

Rowan let out an animalistic scream, teeth bared, veins bulging in their neck. They could feel the skin tearing, the delicate bones of their cranium creaking and straining as the drill was driven deeper. The sound of rending flesh and splintering bone filled the room, a sickening symphony of torture.

"Quiet," Atticus said softly, almost a lullaby. "I can't hear the music."

But Rowan couldn't. The pain was explosive. The sensation of metal pressing into their skin, prying at their scalp, sent bolts of agony through every nerve ending. Tears poured down their face, mixing with sweat and grime. Their throat burned from screaming, and their lungs felt like they might collapse under the effort.

"When purple colored curtains mark the end of the day.."

Atticus's hands were precise. He worked with unnatural patience, ignoring the screams, the thrashing, the spit and tears. Rowan's vision blurred from the tears and the dizzying pain. Their nails dug into the leather straps, leaving ragged marks in desperate, futile attempts to push away the sensation. He could feel Rowan's skull giving way, the bone scraping and grinding against the invading drill. The resistance was fierce at first, but slowly, torturously, the antler began to sink deeper, carving a bloody path through the fragile bone.

He pressed the drill further, driving it in with meticulous methodical force. The pain was excruciatingly sharp, burning throughout their brain. Rowan could feel every nerve ending on fire, the skin tearing, the scalp stretching impossibly around the foreign intrusion. They bit

down on their own lip, trying to stop the scream, but even the bite couldn't muffle the sound that tore from their lungs. They could feel their heartbeat pounding in their ears, the blood pressure building with each excruciating throb. Drool dripped from their slack mouth, tears streamed down their cheeks, and the coppery taste of blood filled their mouth as Atticus's drill split the skin and tore through tissue.

"I'll hear you, my dear, at twilight time."

Rowan's skull throbbed, every nerve ending on high alert, every beat of their heart echoing in their ears. They felt dizzy, their vision swimming, black spots punctuating the flickering light as the pain overwhelmed everything else. Their breaths came in ragged short wet groans with saliva and tears, gasping and choking.

Once Atticus has successfully drilled a hole into their scalp, he hummed in delight, satisfied with the gaping hole made. The drills sound had died, but not Rowan's agonizing groans and yells. Putting the drill aside, Atticus grabbed the antler from the tray. He carefully, methodically, angled the base of the antler into Rowan's skull gaping hole, gentle at first, when suddenly,

Atticus jammed the antler in harder, practically hitting their skull. Rowan screamed again, a blood curdling scream that swallowed the music. More blood pooled out of the wound as the antler was inserted, flooding down their scalp.

And they hadn't even gotten to the second antler yet..

Atticus didn't speak much. He simply hummed quietly to the music, a mocking serenity as if the sound of Rowan's agony was music also.

"Deepening shadows gather splendor as day is done."

Rowan's thrashing weakened after minutes that felt like hours. Pain radiated down their neck, into their spine, into their chest. Every cry left their throat raw, every movement of their head against the straps agonizing. Sweat pooled along their temples, mixing with the tears that wouldn't stop, running into the corners of their mouth and their eyes.

Atticus had stitched the wound close together, making sure the gaping hole had squeezed the antlers base to keep it nice and snug.

When Atticus began adjusting the second antler, the pain sharpened again, a new wave of unbearable torment that made Rowan scream once more. Their entire body shook uncontrollably, muscles spasming with both fear and agony. They tried to bite, tried to kick, to pull themselves free, but the straps held them immobile. They could feel the pain radiating through their entire body, setting every nerve ending ablaze with anguish. The drill tore through the back of their skull, the sharp points gouging into the bone and sending shockwaves of agony through Rowan's cranium.

"Fingers of night will soon surrender the setting sun."

Rowan's stomach heaved, bile rising in their throat as the room spun and darkened around them. The metallic scent of their own blood and vomit was overwhelming, drowning out all other senses. They could hear the wet, squelching sounds of Atticus' fingers sinking into the bloody mess of their scalp, the sickening crunch of their own bone being shattered.

Minutes... or was it hours? blurred together. Rowan's mind began to detach from reality, fixating only on the pain, the burning in their skull, the sensation of metal tearing through them. Every thought became a scream, every nerve a fire, every heartbeat a hammer striking their skull.

"I count the moments, darling 'til you're here with me."

Their vision swam. The flickering light above became unbearable, a strobe of white and yellow punctuating the haze of red from tears and pain. The metallic smell of blood, of scalp and flesh, filled their nostrils. They tried to scream again, but it turned into choking, hacking sobs as nausea overtook them.

They could feel the blood pulsing from the horrific wounds, could feel the antlers shifting and grinding beneath their skin as Atticus adjusted them.

And finally, after what felt like an eternity, Rowan could take no more. Their body went slack, muscles giving out under the strain, the overwhelming agony, the total domination of pain and terror. Their vision darkened, sounds distant, as consciousness slipped away.

"Together..

at last at twilight time."

The music faded.

They hit the edge of unconsciousness with one last, rasping whimper, a mixture of relief, terror, and utter surrender.

There was no gradual fading, no slipping between thoughts. One moment there was all white consuming pain everywhere, and the next there was nothing at all. No dreams. No images. No sound. Consciousness shut off like a switch flipped hard and final.

Their body went utterly still.

Hours passed.

Time moved without them.

Somewhere far away, fluids were cleaned. Metal clinked softly. Footsteps came and went. The light buzzed. The air shifted. But none of it reached Rowan. Their mind was buried too deep, locked behind a merciful, absolute darkness.

Their breathing was shallow but steady, chest barely rising beneath the weight of exhaustion and shock. Every so often, a faint tremor passed through them, muscle memory misfiring,

nerves echoing pain that the brain refused to process. Their heart thudded slow and heavy, like it was trudging through mud.

They didn't dream of Mojave. They didn't dream of Atticus. They didn't dream of deer, or blood, or the desert.

It was the deepest sleep Rowan had had since before the road, before the car, before the battery, before the first shot was fired. Not restful. Not healing. Just... blank. An empty holding space where the mind hid because it had nowhere else to go.

At some point, their body was moved. Lifted. Set down again. The mattress dipped beneath their weight. Something cold brushed their neck, fabric, maybe, or chain, but even that didn't wake them. Their brain refused to surface.

Hours stacked on hours.

The pain was still there, waiting. It lingered beneath the unconsciousness like a loaded spring. Inevitable. But for now, it was muted, distant, wrapped in cotton and silence.

If anyone had been watching, they might've noticed the way Rowan's face had gone strangely calm. Not peaceful, but slack, emptied of expression. Like someone who had finally run out of reactions.

Eventually, slowly, imperceptibly, the darkness began to thin.

Not waking yet.

Just... hovering closer to it.

And when Rowan finally did begin to stir, when sensation crept back in, piece by awful piece, it would hurt.

But for those long, stolen hours, they were gone.

Out *out*.

And the world continued without them.

Rowan woke like their body had been dragged up from the bottom of a lake.

Their eyes wouldn't open at first. Crusted shut, lashes glued together with dried tears and sweat. Their head felt impossibly heavy, like it was filled with wet cement. Blood at dried up in their scalp. Every heartbeat slammed against their skull, a violent, relentless pounding that made their vision spark even before they could see.

Pain didn't arrive. It was already there.

It roared.

A migraine didn't even begin to describe it. This wasn't pressure, it was invasion. Like something had been driven straight through their head and left there, screaming, pulsing in time with their pulse. Every tiny movement sent shards of agony ricocheting behind their eyes. Worse than any ear infection. Worse than the drowning. Worse than anything Mojave had ever done to them.

Rowan tried to sit up. The world tilted violently.

They gasped and immediately regretted it, a broken sound tearing out of their throat as they clutched at the mattress. Their head throbbed so hard it made them nauseous. They let out a low, constant groan without realizing it, the kind that came from somewhere deep and animal, because language had failed.

"Oh—God—*fuck*—" Their voice cracked, barely there.

Tears spilled before they could stop them. Not dramatic sobs, just helpless leaking pain. Their body curled in on itself as if that might somehow contain what was happening inside their skull. Every second was unbearable. Every breath sent new waves of agony through them.

Their hands trembled as they lifted one, instinctively reaching for their head.

The moment their fingers brushed against it..

Burning.

Hot.

Explosive.

Pain.

They screamed.

It ripped out of them, raw and high, their body jerking violently away as if burned. The pain spiked so sharply it stole their breath, stole their vision, stole everything. They collapsed back onto the mattress, sobbing openly now, gasping and shaking.

Whatever was there, whatever Atticus had done, was not meant to be touched. Minutes passed. Or hours. Rowan couldn't tell.

Eventually, shaking and broken, they forced themselves upright again. Their legs felt weak, distant. The room swam. The single flickering light stabbed into their eyes. They clung to the wall as they stood, every step a trial, every movement punished by that relentless pounding in their head.

There was a mirror. Or what passed for one. Cracked. Smudged with god knows what kind of stains. It was mounted crookedly on the wall like it had been an afterthought. Like Atticus wanted them to see what he had reduced them to.

Rowan didn't want to look.

They already knew.

But something in them, some cruel, desperate need to confirm reality dragged them forward. They leaned their weight against the wall and shuffled toward it, breath hitching, vision blurring.

They opened their eyes.

And the sound that left them wasn't a scream.

It was a whimper.

Two small deer antlers rose from their scalp.

Not resting there. Not placed gently. They were part of them now, sewn in tight at the scalp, skin angry and swollen around the base, darkened and raw. The stitching was visible even from a distance, ugly and deliberate. Their hair had been pushed aside to make room for the new mocking assets.

The number tag still hung from their ear.

They really did look like what Atticus fantasized now.

Rowan stared at their reflection like they were looking at a stranger. Their face was pale, hollowed out. Eyes sunken and red. Their mouth hung slightly open, trembling. They barely recognized themselves.

They looked... wrong.

Not human.

Not anymore.

Their knees buckled and they slid down the wall, collapsing onto the floor beneath the mirror. Their hands shook in their lap, fingers curling uselessly as another sob tore free.

"No," they whispered hoarsely. "No, no, no..."

It wasn't just pain. It wasn't just humiliation. It was erasure. It was dehumanization in the rawest form. This wasn't Atticus hurting them because he was angry. This wasn't punishment. This was categorization. A statement. A final, undeniable declaration of what Rowan was to him.

Livestock.

Something to be modified. Displayed. Used. All that gentleness. The tea. The jokes. The warmth. The moment Rowan had dared to believe they were safe, had dared to feel human again.

Gone.

Twisted into this.

Their shoulders shook as they cried violently, the sound ugly and broken, echoing weakly off the concrete walls. They pressed their forehead to the cold floor, careful not to move their head too much, and let the sobs come until their chest ached.

All this because they'd believed kindness. All this because they'd wanted, just *once*.. to trust someone.

"I was so fucking stupid," Rowan whispered into the floor, voice cracking. "I was so fucking stupid... I was s-so FUCKING STUPID!" They screamed, then instantly regretted it from the soreness in their throat.

The pain in their head pulsed on, unrelenting. Every heartbeat was a reminder. Every second stretched long and cruel.

They didn't feel like a person anymore.

They felt like something that had been made. And somewhere deep in their chest, beneath the pain and grief and humiliation, something else stirred. Not hope. Maybe never again. Hope was now a myth a God was just a tale. Just the awful, burning knowledge that whatever Atticus intended to do to them next... this was only the beginning.

Hours passed.

Maybe.

Rowan couldn't tell anymore. Time had stopped behaving like time. It didn't move forward so much as it began pressing down on them until breathing felt like work. Until just being alive felt a chore. They lay on the dirty mattress on their back, staring at the flickering light with unfocused eyes. Their throat was raw, scraped hollow from screaming earlier. Now there was no sound left in them to give. Just silent tears leaking sideways into the thin fabric beneath their head, soaking into stains that weren't theirs.

The pain never left.

It pulsed steadily, monstrosly, as if their skull had been split open and wedged apart, which.. it quite literally did. Every heartbeat sent fire through their head, radiating down their neck, into their shoulders, their teeth. Even lying still hurt. Especially lying still. There was no position that didn't punish them.

So they endured it quietly.

Their head was tilted just slightly to one side, careful, instinctive. Their hands rested uselessly on their stomach, fingers twitching occasionally like they were trying to grasp something that wasn't there anymore.

Despair settled over them like ash. They thought of the bathtub. The way the water had closed over their ears, muffling the world until everything became distant and wrong. The way Mojave's hands had held them there, not frantic, not angry, just patient. Clinical. Almost like a parent teaching their child to swim.

They remembered how it felt to realize they were dying. Not dramatically. Not with clarity. Just with a slow, creeping understanding that their body was failing them and no one was coming to help.

They remembered Mojave's voice, warped and echoing through the water, calm as ever,
I'm going to take your innocence from you.

Rowan's chest tightened.

Every time you think you've lost it, he'd said, I'll show you there was more to strip away.

At the time, Rowan had believed him.

They had believed that moment, when water had filled their lungs and their vision faded, they thought that was the end of it. That whatever innocence they'd had died there, in that tub, the day they died for a few seconds and were dragged back.

They thought killing Lila had been the end of it.

They thought the deer family had been the end of it.

They thought eating Jane's flesh had been the end of it.

They thought being forced to kneel, to crawl, to be tagged and caged, had been the end of it.

Each time, they'd told themselves, *This is it. There's nothing left to lose.*

And each time... they were wrong.

Rowan swallowed painfully, a dry, broken motion.

Mojave had wanted to baptize them in blood. Had wanted to force them to see themselves reflected in him, to accept monstrosity as inevitability. But Mojave, for all his cruelty, had still treated them like something alive. A tool. A weapon. A thing to be sharpened and used.

Atticus hadn't wanted that.

Atticus had wanted absence.

He hadn't stripped Rowan down to make them stronger. He'd stripped them down to see what would remain when there was nothing left.

Rowan's eyes drifted unfocused to the wall, to the shadows dancing there. Their reflection lingered in their mind, the antlers, the stitches, the tag. The way their own face had looked

foreign to them.

That was when the realization finally settled in.

Mojave hadn't taken their innocence. He'd only taught them it could be threatened.

Atticus had taken it.

Completely.

Irreversibly.

Because innocence wasn't just about blood or death or guilt. It was about believing no matter how foolishly, that kindness meant safety. That warmth meant mercy. That someone seeing you cry would choose not to hurt you.

Atticus had let Rowan feel human again just long enough to destroy that belief forever.

Rowan's lips trembled, but no sound came out this time. Their eyes burned, tears sliding down into their hair. Their chest ached with something deeper than pain, something hollowing.

If they survived this...

If they ever left this place...

They knew, with horrifying clarity, that there would never again be a moment where they didn't hesitate when someone smiled at them.

Never again a kindness they wouldn't flinch from. Never again a door they wouldn't expect to lock behind them. Never again would Mojave's cruel honesty... scare Rowan again.

The light flickered overhead.

Rowan stared at it, unblinking.

Whatever they were now, whatever Atticus had made them into. it wasn't innocence. It was something broken and watchful and scarred.

And the worst part was knowing, deep down, that Mojave had been right about one thing after all.

There was always more to strip away.

Chapter 15: The Escape

Chapter Summary

Main character finally escapes Atticus's basement.

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry this chapter took quite a minute to release. I got busy with family and I'm currently sick. So my eyes have been really messed up lately, but I wanted to give you guys an extra long chapter to read, given the past few chapters have been shorter. This one's extra intense so I hope you enjoy!



Decapitation, gore, brief implication of inbreeding, mutilation.

After a long while, long enough that the pain dulled from screaming agony into a constant, nauseating roar, Rowan finally tried to move.

Tried.

They rolled onto their side first, slow and careful, teeth clenched so hard their jaw trembled. The shift made their head throb viciously, the weight of the antlers pulling at their scalp like anchors. Black swam at the edges of their vision. They stayed there for a moment, breathing through their mouth in short, broken pulls, until the room stopped tilting.

Then they pushed.

Their palms slid against the mattress as they forced themselves upright. The instant their spine straightened, pain detonated behind their eyes. Rowan cried out despite themselves, the sound tearing out of their raw throat, and they had to brace a hand against the wall just to stay standing.

They stood there, hunched and shaking.

The antlers cast long shadows across the basement wall distorted and stretched by the bad lighting. They didn't look like antlers anymore. They looked like something mocking.

Something theatrical.

Rowan stared at the shadows, breath hitching.

Deer.

Jane Doe.

John Doe.

John Jr.

The family of three flashed through their mind with awful clarity, the way they had stood together, the way they had trusted, the way Rowan had destroyed them anyway.

The shadows seemed to leer. It felt like punishment. Like the universe had finally decided to stop pretending this was random cruelty and had given them a sentence instead. *You killed them*, the shadows seemed to say. *So wear them. Carry them. Let them grow out of you.*

Rowan's knees buckled slightly.

"Maybe I deserve it," they sobbed, voice cracking as they pressed their forehead against the wall. The stitches screamed in protest, pain blooming, but they didn't pull away. "Maybe this is what I get."

Their hand slid down the wall, leaving a faint smear of grime. They couldn't tell anymore where the line was, where victim ended and monster began. Mojave had blurred it. Atticus had erased it entirely.

Their chest heaved. "I don't know," they whispered, to no one. "I don't know if I'm supposed to be angry or grateful or—"

Something inside them snapped.

It wasn't clean. It wasn't brave. It was ugly, sudden, and desperate.

Rowan turned and kicked the barrel. Their foot slammed into the metal with a hollow clang, pain shooting up their leg, but the barrel tipped anyway. It rocked, then fell, rolling onto its side with a dull crash.

Whatever foul liquid had been inside came pouring out across the concrete floor, spreading fast, carrying with it a stench that made Rowan gag. They staggered back, eyes squinting at the stench as they covered their face, but then,

Something clattered against the floor.

Metal.

Rowan froze.

Amid the spreading mess lay a hammer.

It was slick, coated in the same unidentifiable filth, its handle darkened and warped with age. It looked used. Too used. Rowan stared at it like it might bite them.

Then they laughed.

It came out wrong, somehow hysterical yet thin, shaking halfway to a sob.

Of course.

Of course the one useful thing in the room had been hiding in something revolting. Of course it couldn't just be there. Everything in this place demanded a price.

They bent down and grabbed it.

The texture made their stomach turn, but they didn't let go. They were past caring. Past dignity. Past clean hands. The hammer felt heavy in their grip, real in a way nothing else had lately.

Rowan slowly turned toward the barricaded pathway. The wooden planks loomed at the far end of the room, nailed in place like a warning. Like a refusal. They'd looked at them a hundred times before, written them off as impossible.

Now, with the hammer hanging at their side, they wondered. Their heart began to pound, not just with pain, but with something sharp and dangerous. Hope's uglier cousin. The kind that didn't promise survival, only change.

Rowan took a step forward.

Then another.

The antlers' shadows followed them along the wall, stretching and bending, but this time Rowan didn't look away. They tightened their grip on the hammer, knuckles whitening. They didn't know if breaking through would save them. They didn't know if they deserved saving. But for the first time since waking up with antlers sewn into their skull, Rowan wasn't lying still.

And that felt like rebellion.

Rowan didn't hesitate.

They raised the hammer and brought it down against the first plank.

CRACK.

The vibration shot straight up their arm and into their skull, detonating pain behind their eyes. Rowan cried out, knees buckling, but they didn't drop it. They sucked in a sharp breath through clenched teeth and swung again.

CRACK.

The wood splintered, shallow at first, surface damage. It was Annoying. Tedious. Like the barricade itself was mocking them, refusing to give in easily.

“Of course,” Rowan rasped, voice hoarse. “Why would you make this simple.”

They kept going.

Each swing was agony. The antlers shifted slightly with the motion, pulling at the stitches, sending hot, blinding pain down their spine. Sweat poured down their face. Their arms shook. Their grip slipped more than once, and every slip earned them another sharp flare of punishment from their own body.

But the planks started to give.

Nails loosened. Wood cracked deeper. One board finally snapped free and clattered to the floor.

Rowan laughed breathlessly, half-hysterical. “Yeah,” they muttered. “That’s right. Come apart.”

They worked at the rest with grim determination, switching angles, smashing near the nails, prying where they could. Their hands burned. Their vision blurred. The room rang with dull, uneven blows.

Then,

SNAP.

The hammer’s handle split clean down the middle.

Rowan froze.

For half a second, dread flooded them, until the last plank finally tore loose under the final blow and collapsed forward with a hollow crash.

The barricade was gone.

The hammer fell from their hand in two useless pieces.

Rowan stared at the opening.

Then they exhaled a broken, disbelieving laugh. “Okay,” they whispered. “Okay. I see you.” Hope, real hope flickered in their chest, fragile but alive.

They stepped through.

The pathway beyond was narrow, barely wide enough for their shoulders. The walls pressed in close, rough and unfinished. Rowan had to turn sideways at points, antlers scraping softly

against the wood overhead. The hallway turned left, then right, twisting just enough to disorient.

Their heart pounded louder with every step. At the end stood what looked like a solid wooden wall.

Rowan pressed a hand against it.

It moved.

They blinked.

They Pushed again harder this time and the “wall” shifted, sagging inward. Canvas. Thick, stretched canvas, dusty and stiff with age.

“Oh my god,” Rowan breathed. They shoved it aside and dropped to their knees, crawling through the hole. The edge scraped their arms, the antlers caught for a moment before they twisted free,

and then Rowan was out.

They sat there, stunned, blinking up at the room.

The same room.

The shelves. The concrete. The place where Atticus had stood, calm and smiling, talking about a car battery like he wasn’t about to ruin their life.

Their gaze drifted to the shelf.

The box was still there.

The present.

Rowan stared at it for a long moment, jaw tightening. They already knew. Of course they did. Atticus didn’t give answers. He gave jokes. He gave traps.

Still... their hand reached out. “Please,” Rowan muttered bitterly, lifting it down. “Just once. God, please.. if you love me.. please Just once don’t be—”

They opened it.

...

Then the smell hit them.

Rowan blinked once, twice. Three times.

A pile.. of shit.

Just... *shit*.

They stared at it in stunned disbelief before a sharp, humorless laugh burst out of them.

“Asshole... You absolute—” Rowan slammed the lid shut and hurled the box against the wall. It burst apart on impact, contents spilling grotesquely across the floor.

They laughed again, louder this time, teetering on the edge of hysteria. “Of course. Of course it is. Why would it be anything else?” Their laughter dissolved into a ragged sob.

They sank to the floor, hands tangled in their hair, immediately regretting it as pain flared, but they didn’t stop. “God... I hate you,” Rowan whispered, to Atticus, to Mojave, to the room itself. “I hate all of you.”

The hope hadn’t died.

But it had learned a lesson.

Nothing in this place was given. Everything was taken. So Rowan stopped asking for anything back.

Pain was constant still, no spikes, no mercy, just a low, grinding pressure that lived behind their eyes and down their spine. It made thinking feel distant. Muffled. Useful, in a way.

Hollow hurt less than hope.

Rowan wiped their face with the back of their sleeve and turned toward the staircase door. It loomed at the far end of the basement, thick, reinforced, a metal door. The kind of door that didn’t exist to keep people out. It existed to keep things in.

Rowan approached it slowly, listening.

Nothing.

No footsteps. No humming. No voice drifting from somewhere unseen. The house above might as well have been abandoned. Or worse, peaceful.

They wrapped both hands around the handle and turned it.

Locked.

Of course it was.

Rowan tried again, harder this time. The handle rattled uselessly. They leaned their weight into it, shoulder pressing against the door, teeth clenched as pain flared,

Nothing.

Beside the door was a small sticky note, a note to self reminder from Atticus. Rowan peeled it off the wall and read it:

"Key missing. Check pig feed. I think I dropped it in there while feeding the beasts. Don't forget again."

A sense of cold dread crept up Rowan's spine, realizing that escape required more degradation and decapitation. Nothing they haven't already done before... but still, it was messy work Rowan never expected they'd have to do again..

A hollow laugh slipped out of them before they could stop it. "Right," they muttered, tossing the note. "Because that'd be too easy."

Their gaze dropped to their empty hands.

The shotgun was still gone.

They could still feel its weight if they concentrated, the familiarity of it, the way it had steadied them even when they didn't pull the trigger. Giving it to Atticus had felt humane at the time.

Stupid.

Rowan stepped back from the door and scanned the basement again, slower now. If the house wasn't going to give them an exit, then it could give them something else. A weapon. A tool. A mistake Atticus had made.

They moved quietly. Every step placed with intention. Their feet barely whispered against the concrete. The antlers made that harder, brushing doorframes, threatening to give them away with every careless shift of posture. Rowan learned quickly how to angle their head, how to duck without thinking. Adaptation came fast when punishment was immediate.

The basement stretched farther than it should have. Corridors branched off at odd angles. Rooms bled into each other without clear purpose, storage bleeding into workspace, workspace bleeding into something that looked uncomfortably like living quarters.

And everywhere were notes. Small ones at first. Easy to miss.

A scrap of paper taped to a pipe:

"Check valves on Tuesdays. Don't forget again."

Another, folded neatly and wedged onto a shelf:

"Knives go back CLEAN. Rust ruins everything."

Rowan read each one twice, committing the handwriting to memory. Atticus had neat handwriting, like a poet with a side hobby for torture. Fitting.

Memory problems, Rowan thought dully.

So this place ran on reminders instead of mercy.

They kept moving.

The air changed as they went deeper, thicker, carrying a smell Rowan tried not to name. It wasn't rot exactly. It was... life, packed too tightly together. Breathing where it shouldn't be. Claustrophobic was the best way to describe it.

The hallway narrowed.

At the end of it stood a wide metal door, ajar just enough to leak darkness. No light spilled out. No sound, either, just a dense, swallowing quiet that pressed against Rowan's ears.

They stopped.

Listened.

Nothing.

Slowly, Rowan edged closer.

Inside was a large room. Bigger than the others. The ceiling disappeared upward into shadow, and the walls were swallowed by darkness so complete it felt intentional, like the room was being hidden even from itself.

Cages lined the far side.

Rowan couldn't see what was in them.

They could hear it. But they already knew. They had saw a glimpse of the animals in agony when Atticus dragged them through here with the lights on. For now, instead, they heard breathing. Uneven. Soft whimpers that stopped the second Rowan shifted their weight. A low, wet cough. The faint clink of metal when someone moved too much and learned they couldn't.

Rowan's stomach twisted.

Their gaze drifted to the wall beside the door.

An empty fuse box hung open there, its metal door dangling uselessly. Inside, three slots yawned, vacant.

Taped just above it was another note. This one was longer. Rowan leaned in, squinting to read it in the low light:

"Cage room lights still out. Needs 3 fuses.

Moved extras to other rooms, check workbench, feed storage, and utility hall.

Do NOT forget to turn them off again. Wastes power."

Rowan stared at the words.

Three fuses.

Three rooms.

Three chances to make the dark go away.

From somewhere inside the cage room, something shifted, and a voice whispered, hoarse and desperate, "Please?"

Rowan flinched back like they'd been struck. Their heart pounded, loud enough they were sure it could be heard. They pressed a hand over their mouth, forcing themselves to breathe quietly through their nose.

They didn't answer. They couldn't bring themselves to right now. The darkness felt suddenly intentional. A choice. Atticus hadn't forgotten to light this room. He'd decided not to. Decided to swallow these animals in darkness.

Rowan stepped away from the doorway, backing into the hall, pulse racing.

Three fuses, their mind repeated.

And whatever was in those cages was counting on the light.

Rowan swallowed hard and turned back into the basement, moving deeper toward the places Atticus had labeled, categorized, and left breadcrumbs through like he expected someone to follow. For the first time since waking up with antlers in their skull, Rowan wasn't reacting.

They were searching.

Rowan found the fuses one by one.

Not easily. Nothing in this place was ever easy.

The first sat forgotten beneath a workbench, taped to the underside like Atticus had hidden it from himself. Rowan had to crouch low to see it, dust sticking to their palms as they peeled it free. The second was in feed storage, jammed into a cracked plastic bin between bags that reeked of grain and copper and something sweetly rotten underneath. The third took the longest. Utility hall. Backtracking. Holding their breath as a distant sound made their spine lock tight.

Each fuse felt heavier than it should have.

Not physically. Morally.

By the time Rowan stood again in front of the cage room's fuse box, their hands were shaking, not from fear, not exactly, but from something deeper. Anticipation without hope. Like bracing for a verdict.

They slid the first fuse into place.

Click.

Nothing happened.

The second.

Click.

Still dark.

The third,

The lights slammed on all at once.

Not a gentle glow. Not a gradual awakening. A brutal, industrial glare flooded the room, buzzing loudly overhead, illuminating everything Atticus had chosen to keep hidden.

Rowan staggered back a step.

Cages.

Rows and rows of them, stacked two, sometimes three high, stretching farther back than Rowan had thought the room even went. Metal bars. Rusted locks. Bent frames where something had fought too hard and lost.

Anthro animals filled them. Deer with ribs too visible, eyes too large in sunken faces. Goats with broken horns, one twisted at a wrong angle, one snapped clean off. Rabbits pressed together so tightly they looked fused, ears torn, fur patchy and matted dark. Others Rowan didn't immediately recognize, odd hybrids, like.. like as if Atticus had been inbreeding different species together to create something immoral, something unnatural. God.. what kind of fucked up monster bred animals with dysfunctional genes with an ever lesser healthy inbred?

A pug breeder, thats who.

Except in Rowans human lifestyle, that was deemed as "cute" and legal.

But after seeing this, Rowan was certain humans would grimace at the sight if the pug could walk on two legs and talk, well... *wheeze* through every syllable.

Some were barely moving, some staring straight ahead like the light had burned something out of them. Like their heart was still beating but they had already died a long time ago.

Some cages were empty.

Those were worse.

The noise hit a second later. Whimpering, Shallow breathing, either due to pain or a birth defect. A sob cut short like it had learned not to finish. Metal rattling softly as someone shifted and hit the limit of their space.

Rowan's stomach dropped through the floor. "Oh god," they whispered, the words barely audible.

This wasn't holding.

This was inventory.

Experimentation.

The room smelled like fear and antiseptic and something iron-heavy that made Rowan's mouth water and twist in disgust at the same time. Their antlers cast branching shadows across the cages now, warping the bars into shapes that looked like ribs, like spines.

A sound cut through it all.

"Hey—"

Rowan flinched.

A deer in the nearest row pressed themselves against the bars, fingers wrapped tight around the metal. Their fur was dull, patchy along the arms, chest rising and falling too fast.

"Please," the deer whispered, eyes locking onto Rowan's face. "You're— you're not one of them. Please."

Rowan froze.

Every instinct screamed to step forward. To reach out. To promise something.

But something else, something Atticus had carved into them with patience and pain, held them still.

The deer swallowed hard. "That.. t-that asshole broke my spine.. please.. you have to get me out of here.." he begged, quietly. "He... he messes with the systems. The pipes. I saw him earlier." They nodded weakly toward the far wall. "They control the cages. Power, locks— everything. If you realign them, sometimes they— they open. Sometimes."

Hope flared in the cages like a match struck too close to gasoline. Heads lifted. Eyes turned.

Rowan's chest tightened painfully.

Once, they wouldn't have hesitated. Once, kindness had been reflex, not a decision. They would have trusted the plea, trusted the eyes, trusted that helping was enough justification on its own.

Now..?

Now every voice sounded like a trap.

Every request felt weighted with consequence. Atticus had taken something vital from them, not just safety, not just dignity, but the ability to believe that help didn't come with a hook.

Rowan forced their feet to move anyway. "I—" Their voice cracked. They swallowed and tried again. "I'll try."

The words felt hollow though. Obligatory. Like reading lines off a script they no longer believed in. Because that's what the humane thing is to do, right?

They approached the pipes slowly.

They ran along the wall in a messy, deliberate pattern, thick metal lines intersecting at odd angles, some valves turned the wrong way, others mismatched entirely. Whoever had set it up hadn't been sloppy. It was wrong on purpose.

A note was taped nearby, half-hidden behind a junction.

Rowan peeled it free:

"Cages won't open if pipes are dry.

Out of fuel again.

Jars moved around basement, don't leave them all in one place. Fire hazard."

Rowan let the paper fall.

Fuel.

Of course.

They reached out and tested one of the valves, twisting it back into alignment. Metal groaned in protest. A low hum started somewhere in the wall, then died.

Nothing opened.

The deer watched them desperately. "Did it— did it work?"

Rowan didn't answer right away.

They stood there, hand still on the pipe, staring at the cages, at the bodies pressed inside them. At the way some animals didn't even lift their heads anymore.

They should care more, they thought distantly. They should feel something stronger. Urgency. Rage. Compassion. The old them would've.

Instead, all they felt was tired. And that scared Rowan more. Their loss of empathy.

"I need fuel," Rowan said finally. "He... he left jars around."

A ripple moved through the room, not relief, not joy, but fragile, dangerous hope. Rowan turned away before it could latch onto them.

They didn't trust hope anymore.

As they headed back into the maze of the basement, their reflection flashed briefly in a warped metal surface, antlers, hollow eyes, bloodstains they no longer noticed.

They paused.

Once, helping had been who they were.

Now, it was something they were choosing to do despite everything in them screaming not to. And that scared Rowan more than the cages ever could.

Rowan found the jars the same way they'd found everything else in this place. By following Atticus's thinking. Not logic. Not efficiency. Habit. Forgetfulness disguised as ritual.

One jar sat on top of a filing cabinet, half-hidden behind a stack of yellowed notes, the glass cloudy with glowing orange residue. Another was tucked beneath a sink in a washroom that smelled like bleach trying and failing to erase blood. A third waited on a high shelf in the harvest prep area, dangerously close to heat, as if Atticus had nearly forgotten it there and only remembered at the last second.

Each jar sloshed when Rowan lifted it. The sound made their skin crawl.

Fuel had a smell that stuck to the back of the throat. Rowan's hands were slick with it by the time they returned to the pipe system, fingers trembling as they twisted valves open one by one.

They poured slowly.

The fuel disappeared into the pipes with a greedy, hollow glug, metal ticking as it warmed. Somewhere deeper in the walls, something came alive, a low vibration that traveled through the concrete and up into Rowan's bones.

The hum didn't sound hopeful, Though. Just another phase into the next step of escape. And even then, escaping wouldn't *really* mean 'escape.'

Lights along the cage wall brightened. Panels flickered from red to a sickly amber. Locks began to click, not all at once, but in staggered intervals, like the system itself was hesitant to obey.

Rowan turned back toward the cages. The deer was still watching them. Up close, it was worse.

So much *worse*.

The cage door creaked as Rowan pulled it open, metal shrieking softly in protest. The deer didn't rush forward. Didn't even try to stand.

Their body lay at a wrong angle, spine bowed unnaturally near the lower back. One hind leg twitched uselessly, dragging instead of lifting. Their hands shaking, thin, gripped the bars as if holding themselves together was the only thing keeping them from falling apart entirely.

Rowan's breath caught.

"*Oh*," they whispered.

The deer followed their gaze and froze.

"...Please.. I.. I can't stay in here any longer.." they said quietly.

Rowan knelt despite themselves, knees aching as they lowered to the deer's level. Up close, they could see bruising beneath the fur, deep and dark. Old injuries layered over new ones. Healing had never been allowed to finish, and when it did, It healed unnaturally.

"How long?" Rowan asked, their voice barely soft and comforting anymore, like it lost its warmth entirely and ability to sooth, now.. it just sounds.. robotic.

The deer swallowed. "I don't know. Time's weird in here. He—" Their breath hitched. "He said I kicked wrong. Said prey that can't run shouldn't pretend it deserves legs."

Rowan closed their eyes. Their mind betrayed them instantly.

Mojave would say leave them.

Not cruelly. Practically.

Mojave would say a broken animal slows the herd. Gets everyone killed.

Mojave would say survival isn't moral.. it's efficient.

Rowan could hear his voice with awful clarity, calm and certain. He wouldn't even enjoy this choice. He'd just make it.

Rowan opened their eyes again.

The deer was watching them now, not begging. Not pleading.

Waiting.

That somehow felt worse.

"I can't—" Rowan started, then stopped.

They looked around the room. At the cages still locked. At the ones that weren't. At the rest of the animals old Rowan would save. At the shadows of antlers stretching across concrete like reminders, whispering, *this is who you are*.

If they took the deer...

They'd move slower.

They'd need to hide more carefully.

If Atticus found them, he wouldn't just take Rowan back. He'd punish everyone.

Rowan's hands curled into fists.

This was the point where morality died. Where it always died. They knew it. Felt it settling in their chest like cold sediment.

And yet,

They reached out anyway. Their hand hovered inches from the deer's arm, shaking. "I don't know if I can get you out," Rowan admitted hoarsely. "I don't know if I can carry you. Or if... if it'll even matter."

The deer's ears flicked slightly. Their voice was soft. "I *know*."

That answer hit harder than any scream could have.

"I just—" Rowan swallowed hard. "I don't want you to die alone in a cage."

The deer let out a sound that might have been a laugh once. "Then don't let him decide when I stop being... something."

Rowan's chest ached. This wasn't heroism. There was no rush, no clarity. Just a slow, grinding realization that if they walked away now, something inside them would finally be gone for good.

Maybe Mojave was right.

Maybe this was stupid.

Maybe morality was just another way to get killed.

Rowan slid an arm behind the deer's back anyway, careful, terrified of hurting them more. The deer gasped softly, biting back a cry.

"We'll figure something out," Rowan said, not believing it. Pretending anyway. As they lifted, every instinct screamed danger.

But they lifted.

And for the first time since waking up with antlers sewn into their skull, Rowan chose not what was smart,

but what still felt unbearably human.

Rowan tried.

That was the cruelest part.

They braced their feet, slid one arm under the deer's shoulders, another around their waist, and lifted just enough to get them clear of the cage floor. The deer's breath hitched immediately, sharp and involuntary, and a sound tore out of them before they could stop it. Not a scream. Worse. A broken, animal sound of pain that echoed off the concrete walls.

Rowan froze.

"I'm sorry," they whispered desperately, lowering them a fraction. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry—" The deer shook, hands clutching at Rowan's sleeve, teeth clenched so hard their jaw trembled. "Don't—don't stop," they begged. "Please. Just—just go—"

Another sound cut through the air.

A squeal.

Not close. Not yet.

But loud.

Rowan's blood went cold.

The squeal came again, lower this time, reverberating through the pipes, followed by the unmistakable scrape of something heavy shifting its weight. Hooves, dragging across concrete. A wet snort. A breath pulled deep and eager, and the grinding chatter of metal, a chainsaw.

"No," Rowan breathed.

The deer heard it too. Their eyes went wide, pupils blown, panic flooding their face. "It's *here*," they gasped. "Please—*please* don't leave me, I'll be quiet, I *swear*—"

Rowan looked down the aisle of cages.

Shadows moved.

Something massive passed between the lights, blocking them in uneven chunks. The smell hit next, metallic and oil, unmistakably alive. Rowan's heart slammed so hard it hurt.

They couldn't carry the deer.

They knew it instantly, with awful clarity. Even if the deer hadn't been injured, Rowan's body was wrecked, stitched scalp, aching spine, arms trembling from exhaustion. With the deer like this? Every step would be noise. Every second slower than death.

Mojave would say run.

Mojave would already be gone.

Rowan's hands loosened.

The deer felt it.

"No—no, no, don't—" Their grip tightened, nails digging into Rowan's skin. "Please. I *helped* you. I told you about the pipes! I—"

"I know," Rowan choked. "*I know.*"

Another squeal, right there now. Close enough that Rowan could feel it in their chest, the vibration of it rattling their ribs. The pig-man rounded the corner of the cage row, massive and hunched, its silhouette grotesque against the lights. It didn't speak. Didn't need to.

It smelled food.

Rowan stepped back.

The deer realized what was happening a half second before Rowan did.

"No!" they screamed, voice cracking completely now. "Don't leave me—please, I'll crawl, I'll crawl, just don't leave me—PLEASE—"

His pleas felt like a knife straight to the rib.

Rowan turned,

And ran.

The sound behind them was unbearable. That thin, animal hope that someone, anyone would come back.

It sounded like Rowan ran out the door from hell, leaving behind an innocent life screaming up at heaven, begging for some divine intervention, before their prayers were torn out of their throat by Rowan's selfishness, a guttural dying sound that confirmed their every fear. The fear that it didn't bother them at all.

Not anymore.

What remained now, was a loss of humanity.

The deer's panicked cries cut short by the pig man's ecstatic squeals echoing through the room, metal rattling as cages shook. Rowan didn't look back. Couldn't. Their vision blurred anyway, tears burning their eyes as they sprinted down the aisle, heart pounding, lungs screaming.

Time bought.

At a price Rowan would never stop paying.

They ducked into the first side room they could find, slamming the door shut behind them and bracing it with their shoulder, breath coming in ragged gasps. Their hands shook violently as they looked around, desperate.

“I’m sorry,” they whispered again, to no one. To everyone. To some fake sympathy that they still cared yet chose themselves. “I’m so *fucking* sorry.”

Rowan tore through the room with shaking hands.

Drawers. Shelves. Crates shoved aside with dull clatters that sounded far too loud in the cavernous quiet between screams. Their breath came sharp and fast, each inhale catching like broken glass in their chest. They didn’t stop to think, thinking hurt too much, so they moved, frantically, driven by the simple need to have something in their hands when the thing outside finished eating.

The sounds carried everywhere. The deer’s screams, high, desperate, dissolving into hoarse sobs, rang through the basement, threading themselves through the pipes and vents like ghosts. Beneath them came the pigs wet snorts and devouring squeals, the heavy rhythm of feeding. It echoed in pulses, rising and falling, like the place itself was breathing.

Rowan’s hands paused on the edge of a workbench.

They listened.

And that’s when it hit them.

They were still moving. Still searching. Still thinking about exits and angles and weight and leverage.

They aren’t crying.

They weren’t frozen.

They weren’t curled up on the floor, choking on guilt the way they used to. Their chest hurt, yes, but it wasn’t splitting open. Their vision wasn’t tunneling. Their hands weren’t useless. That hollow, cracking devastation they used to feel? The one that used to buckle their knees and make them fall apart?

It’s not there.

They swallowed hard.

Why am I not breaking?

The answer slid into place quietly, horrifying in its calm.

Because they had chosen.

Not the deer.

Themselves.

Rowan pressed a hand to their mouth, breathing through their fingers as another scream cut off abruptly in the distance. Silence followed, final.. broken only by the pigs' satisfied noises and the low hum of Atticus's systems.

I should feel worse, Rowan thinks, almost detached. I should be on the floor. I should be screaming too.

"I'm still here," Rowan whispered, like they needed to hear it out loud. "I'm still—"

The word human wouldn't come.

They dragged a hand down their face, smearing sweat and grime, heart pounding harder now, not from fear, but from the realization that something essential was slipping away. That the part of them that would have collapsed under the weight of that choice... hadn't.

Apathy crept in like frost. Cold, terrifying.. but... efficient. And that apathy was how they still were alive.

Rowan forced themselves to move again, harder this time, angrier. They overturned a crate, nothing. Kicked aside a tangle of wires, useless. Their foot caught on something heavy and metallic, sending it swinging with a hollow clink.

They froze.

The chain.

Rowan stared at it, throat tightening as memory surged, the pressure at their neck, the way their vision had sparkled, Atticus's calm voice in their ear.

Their fingers trembled as they reached for it.

The metal was cold. Familiar. It dragged slightly as they pulled it free, pooling on the floor at their feet like a dead thing. Rowan lifted it, testing the weight. Solid. Heavy enough to hurt. Flexible enough to wrap, to pull, to choke.

Fitting, a traitorous thought whispered.

Rowan closed their eyes for a second. When they opened them again, something had settled behind their gaze, a forced resolve.

"I didn't want this," they murmured, gripping the chain tighter. "But I'm not dying down here."

No more hesitation.

No more unopened presents.

If something came through that door,

They would *not* be helpless again.

In the distance, the pigs squealed again, closer now, restless, their meal finished and ready for seconds.

Rowan wrapped the chain around their forearm, letting it bite into their skin just enough to remind them they were real. Still Alive. Still choosing themselves. They stepped back toward the door, shoulders squared, breath steadying despite the blood roaring in their ears.

Whatever came next,

They would meet it standing.

The basement doesn't go quiet after the feeding. It settles, like a throat swallowing, like something satisfied and already hungry again.

Rowan presses themselves flat behind a leaning shelf of rusted tools and split crates, chest stuttering so hard it hurts. The air is thick with iron and fuel and rot. Every breath tastes wrong.

The pig is coming.

Rowan slips into the shadows just as it lumbers into view.

It's worse up close.

Massive shoulders hunched forward, spine ridged beneath patchy bristles slick with gore. Its mouth is still red, tusks clotted with meat, jaw working as if chewing something that isn't there anymore. One eye swivels independently, milky and wild.

And in its grip,

A chainsaw.

The engine coughs, then roars to life, the sound ripping through the basement like a scream made of metal. Rowan flinches despite themselves, teeth clenching so hard their jaw pops.

The pig snorts, head lifting.

It smells them.

Rowan presses deeper into the clutter, chain coiled tight around their fist, heart slamming so hard it feels like it's trying to break out through their ribs. The chainsaw revs again, closer now, teeth biting air.

Rowan waits. Counts breaths.

One.

Two.

Three,

They launch.

The chain whips out and locks around the pig's throat from behind, metal biting into flesh as Rowan throws their weight back with everything they have. For a split second, just one, the pig chokes. Its squeal cuts sharp and high, panicked.

Hope flares, then the pig moves. It thrashes like a freight train, body slamming backward, crushing Rowan into the wall so hard their vision whites out. Something cracks, Rowan's antlers slam against concrete, pain exploding through their skull. They scream, raw and involuntary, nearly losing their grip.

The pig bucks again, elbowing, stomping, choking but not enough. It's too strong. Too heavy. The chain slips.

This won't work.

Rowan lets go and runs.

The chainsaw screams as the pig gives chase, engine snarling inches behind them. Rowan vaults over debris, skids around corners, lungs burning as the maze of cages blurs past. They don't think, can't think, just move, feet slapping wet concrete.

Then,

They see it.

What's left of the deer.

The floor is slick with blood and torn muscle, hooves twisted at wrong angles, viscera smeared wide like someone painted the ground red. Rowan pivots hard, boots splashing straight through it.

The pig doesn't.

Its hooves hit the gore and slide against an organ.

The pig flails as its footing goes out from under it. It crashes backward with a thunderous squeal, the chainsaw slipping from its grip, The chainsaw swung wildly, its ravenous maw searching for something, to tear into.

..and landing wrong.

The sound that follows is... indescribable.

In a moment of sickening, twisted fate, the spinning blade found its mark. It sank into the pig man's flesh with a ripping, tearing noise that seemed to reverberate through the very bones of the basement. The creature screamed, a high, piercing wail of agony that curdled the blood, its body convulsing as the chainsaw bit deeper and deeper.

The pig shrieks, high and animal and terrified, body jerking as the chainsaw chews inward. Spraying blood everywhere in choking arcs, painting the walls, the floor, Rowan.

Rowan stands there, frozen.

Mildly horrified.

Then the chainsaw digs deeper.

With a final, shuddering lurch, the chainsaw tore through the last of the pig's abdominal wall, and his torso split open like an overripe melon. Rowan watched in horrified awe as steaming loops of intestines and glistening coils of mesentery tumbled out onto the blood-slicked floor, the violated flesh gaping open to reveal the ruined architecture of the pig's insides.

The pig's scream cuts off mid-note, replaced by a wet, gurgling silence broken only by the whine of the blade as it finishes its work.

Rowan shakily breathes. Adrenaline still screaming through their veins, heart pounding like it hasn't realized yet that they're still alive. The pig's screams grew weaker, the life draining from his eyes as his body finally succumbed to the devastating injuries. His legs twitched once, twice, before falling still, his half-dissected corpse oozing a lake of blood and viscera around him.

Rowan don't look away.

They don't throw up.

They just stand there, chain heavy in their hand, and realize with quiet dread that the part of them that would've collapsed, or prayed, or begged forgiveness,

Is very, very quiet now.

The chainsaw is still whining when Rowan steps forward. Not screaming anymore, just that steady, awful whirr, like it's impatient. Like it wants more.

Rowan grips the handle with both hands. It's slick. Warm. Their fingers almost slide, and for a split second they think about letting it go, about backing away and pretending this is done,

Then they remember the note.

Atticus's neat handwriting.

One of the pigs swallowed the key.

Rowan swallows.

There's no ceremony to it.

They brace their boots, tighten their jaw, and bring the chainsaw down.

The blade bites, judders, screams louder as it meets resistance. Rowan flinches at the vibration rattling up their arms, teeth clacking together as the saw bucks like a living thing. The smell hits immediately, burnt meat, hot metal, something sour and coppery that coats the back of their throat.

They gag once. Hard.

Then they keep going.

This isn't rage. That's the worst part. It's not even fear anymore. It's task-oriented. Mechanical. Rowan cuts because something needs to be found. Because stopping would mean thinking, and thinking would mean remembering the deer's voice, the way it begged.

So they don't stop.

If Rowan had a nickle for every time they had to butcher a body to find a key, they'd have two, but its still weird that it happened twice..

They continue cutting the pig's torso where the chainsaw didn't finish, following instinct more than anatomy, the chainsaw chewing through muscle and bone with a sound that vibrates straight into Rowan's skull. Their arms ache. Their shoulders burn. Their antlers brush the low ceiling and scrape, but Rowan barely registers it.

Time loses meaning.

Eventually, the saw chokes and Rowan lifts it, panting, chest heaving. Steam rises from the mess below. Blood pools around their boots, spreading slowly, creeping like it's alive.

Rowan drops the chainsaw to idle and starts digging, hands shaking as they push aside what's left, fingers numb, slick with filth. Their stomach flips with every movement. This is worse than the killing. This is searching.

Please, Rowan thinks, not in prayer, but in practicality. Please let it be here. Please don't make this pointless.

Their fingers hit something solid.

Metal.

Rowan freezes.

Slowly, they pull it free.

A key. Bent slightly. Coated in blood and bile, but unmistakable.

For a long moment, Rowan just stares at it.

They clamp a hand over their mouth, breath hitching, eyes burning as adrenaline finally starts to crash.

They did this.

They survived.

Rowan closes their fist around the key until the teeth bite into their palm. The pain grounds them, keeps them upright. Somewhere above, the basement hums with stolen power, cages buzzing, pipes alive.

There's still a door to reach.

Still a way out.

Rowan steps back from the butchered pig, boots peeling free of the floor with a wet sound, and forces themselves to move, because stopping now would mean looking too closely at what they've become.

And they're not ready for that yet.

Then,

A noise carries through the basement like a bad memory you can't shut up.

A scream, high at first then cut short by the whine of a saw.

Rowan freezes mid-step.

The sound is unmistakable. It's coming from that room. The butcher room. The one that still lives under their skin, where the air smelled like iron and antiseptic and lies, where Atticus's hands were steady and gentle and unforgivable.

Rowan eases closer, breath shallow, ears straining. Another scream. Closer than they'd like. Followed by Atticus's voice, muffled, calm, almost conversational. Like he's correcting a mistake. Like this is just maintenance.

More oldie music played from inside, an unmistakably sign that Atticus was indeed torturing and filming another innocent.

So he's down here.

Alive. Busy.

Rowan's grip tightens around the key until their knuckles ache. Every instinct flares to fight and finish it. The chainsaw is right there. Their hands still remember the weight, the resistance, how easy it became once they stopped thinking.

They take one step toward the butcher room door.

Then they stop.

The door is solid metal. Reinforced. Built to keep sound in. The chainsaw wouldn't bite. Even if it did, the noise would be a flare in the dark, a promise of suicide. And worse, Rowan knows themselves well enough now to understand this wouldn't be justice. It would be spectacle. Atticus would love that.

Rowan exhales through their nose, slow and controlled, forcing the tremor out of their hands.

Get out and go.

That was always the plan.

They turn away.

Every step toward the basement stairs feels wrong, like leaving a limb behind. Another scream echoes, and Rowan flinches despite themselves, jaw clenching hard enough to hurt. They don't look back. They can't.

The basement door looms ahead, tall, heavy, scratched to hell from past attempts. Rowan slots the key into the lock. It resists for a heart-stopping second.

Click.

The sound is quiet.

Rowan twists the handle and pulls. The basement door groaned open onto a narrow stairwell, the steps rising like a spine into darkness.

Behind them, the saw screams again.

Whatever is left of them will have to reckon with the cost later. For now, all that matters is the door above, and the fact that, for the first time in a long while, it isn't locked yet.

Rowan stood there for a second too long, swaying.

Blood had dried stiff in their hair, flaked across their clothes, smeared their hands to the wrists. The antlers burned where they'd been forced into them, every pulse of their heartbeat sent heat and pressure lancing through their skull.

Up there.

That was the way out.

They took the first step.

Pain bloomed immediately, sharp and nauseating. Their vision wavered, spots swimming. Rowan clenched their teeth and kept moving. One step. Then another. Each footfall felt like it rattled the antlers loose inside their head, like their skull was a cracked bowl barely holding together.

At the top of the stairs loomed the double wooden doors. Thick and Old. Scratched and stained with use. The outside door. Freedom, or at least something pretending to be it.

Rowan reached the landing.

Before they could touch the handle,

The doors burst open.

Light flooded the stairwell, sudden and blinding. Cold night air rushed down, carrying the smell of the desert dry earth. A massive silhouette filled the doorway, blocking the moon like a wall of meat and shadow.

Another beast.

A pig-man, bigger than the one below. Broader shoulders. Thick neck. A machete hung loosely in one hand, its edge dull with use. The creature squealed, high and furious, hooves scraping wood as it leaned forward, ready to charge.

Rowan's heart dropped into their gut.

No weapon.

They'd left it behind.

Their body reacted before their mind did, knees bending, shoulders tightening, instinct screaming run even though there was nowhere to go. The pig took a step down, nostrils flaring, saliva stringing between tusks.

Then,

It froze.

A sharp, wet sound cut through the air. The pig squealed again, but this time it was different, shrill shocked, breaking apart mid-note. Its body stiffened, shuddered, then went slack, collapsing sideways with a heavy thud that shook the doorway.

Rowan flinched.

Behind the falling mass stood a familiar silhouette.

Tall. Lean. Feline.

Mojave straightened, a cleaver buried deep in the pig's skull. He wrenched it free with a practiced twist, blood splattering the wooden doors behind him. The pig didn't move again.

For one impossible second, Rowan couldn't breathe.

Then,

Relief.

Hot, shameful, traitorous relief bloomed in their chest.

Relief.

From *him*.

The cat who had drowned them.

Who had fed them Janes flesh and called it venison.

Who had broken Lila and made Rowan finish the job.

Who had sent them here in the first place.

They just stared at each other.

Mojave's ears twitched forward, pupils narrowing as he took Rowan in, the blood-matted hair, the antlers jutting from their scalp, the number ear tag, the blood sprays painting their body.

"...I heard squealing coming from down there," Mojave said at last, voice low and smooth. "Thought it was you."

Rowan swallowed. Their mouth opened. Closed. Nothing came out.

Mojave tilted his head slightly, knife catching the moonlight. "You were gone longer than I expected," he continued. "So I figured... something went wrong.. so I came to finish the job myself."

His gaze drifted up.

Locked onto the antlers.

He stilled.

Something dark and sharp flickered behind his eyes.

"...Huh," he murmured. He stepped closer, peering at them with naked interest now. "Look at that."

His clawed finger lifted, not touching, but close enough that Rowan flinched anyway. "I told you to kill him on sight. Immediate. No talking. No listening." His tone shifted, faintly scolding. "Do you not trust me?"

He gestured vaguely at their head. "And now you're wearing decorations."

Half mocking. Half amused.

Half... displeased.

Rowan let out a shaky, broken laugh that dissolved into a sob halfway through. Tears streamed down their face as they staggered fully out of the stairwell. They didn't know whether to collapse into Mojave's arms or curse him too.

Rowan sucked in a breath that scraped their throat raw.

"No," they said hoarsely. "I didn't trust you."

Mojave blinked.

Just once.

Rowan let out a laugh that sounded more bitter, fractured. "But you were right." Their voice splintered, then snapped into something hard and sharp. "I should've fucking *killed* him immediately."

That did it.

Mojave didn't just pause, he stilled. Ears angled forward. Tail went rigid. Even his breathing seemed to stop.

Rowan had never said that before. Not once. Not even *close*.

They didn't wait for him to answer.

The dam broke.

Rowan lurched forward, rage overtaking exhaustion, knees giving out as they hit the ground hard. Gravel bit into their palms. Their sobs weren't quiet or pretty, there was nothing fragile about them. They tore out of Rowan's chest like something feral, something furious.

"He—he sewed them into my head," Rowan choked, fingers clawing uselessly at the dirt. "He—he made me eat—he made me—god—everything—all of it—" Their voice cracked, collapsing into a half-scream, half-whimper. "He treated me like I was cattle, Mojave," Rowan shouted, antlers throbbing with every word. "Like I wasn't human! Not human! Not fucking human!"

Their shoulders shook violently. Rowan's sobs were shaking, their antlers stabbing at their skull, but they didn't care. They screamed every word with the full weight of the terror that Atticus had inflicted.

"I—he—he—he took everything!" Rowan gasped, fists trembling as they slammed into the ground. "My body. My fucking mind. My choice. My—my innocence!" Their breath came in ragged pulls. "Do you understand?! Do you understand? He's worse—he's worse than you ever were!"

That landed.

These weren't tears of weakness anymore.

They shook with hatred.

“I’ve never felt so fucking violated,” Rowan snarled, nails biting into their palms until blood welled. “I didn’t even know it was possible. I thought—” a hysterical laugh tore out of them, sharp and ugly, “—I thought you were the worst thing that could happen to me. You fucking *ruined* my life, Mojave.”

They laughed again, broken and shaking.

Mojave watched.

Silent. Focused. Like a predator studying a wound.

“But he ruined kindness,” Rowan went on, voice collapsing again. “Every smile. Every soft voice. Every shred of comfort.. I’ll never—never accept generosity again without wondering if someone wants to gut me.” Their breath hitched. “You never pretended to be kind. He did. He hid it. He enjoyed it.”

Rowan squeezed their eyes shut.

“I felt less than human,” they whispered. “Like I was already dead and he was just... deciding how to carve me up.”

They laughed again, unhinged this time. “I started thinking maybe that’s what I was. A fucking offering. Something you were handing off. Like I was some kind of sick transaction between you and him.”

Mojave’s pupils dilated.

Slowly, his grip tightened on the cleaver.

“...I would never,” he said, matter of factly.

Rowan dragged the back of their hand across their face, smearing blood and tears together. “I hate him,” they whispered. “I hate him... I.. *hate*... him.. I h-hate him so much it makes me feel sick.”

Silence stretched between them, thick, humming with things neither of them said.

Mojave stepped closer.

“Hatred,” he murmured, almost soft, “is *clarity*.”

He circled Rowan slowly, paws crunching against gravel, eyes never leaving them. “You see it now, don’t you?” he said quietly. “The lie. The costume. The way predators dress themselves up so prey walks closer.”

He stopped in front of them again, gaze lifting to the antlers.

“You thought your innocence died in my tub,” Mojave said. “You thought it drowned with you.”

Rowan’s breath hitched.

“But innocence doesn’t disappear all at once,” Mojave continued. “It sheds. Layer by layer.” A faint smile curved his mouth. “Like skin. Or fur.”

His eyes gleamed.

“I told you,” he said softly. “Every time you think it’s gone, I’ll show you there was more to take.”

Rowan’s shoulders sagged. “He took everything,” they whispered.

Mojave leaned down, close enough that Rowan could smell iron and cold night air on him. “No,” he corrected gently. “He finished what was *already* breaking.”

Something old flickered across Mojave’s face, something feral. Intimate. Ugly.

“I ate my own tail,” he said calmly. “Bit it clean off. Because it still carried something soft.” His eyes sharpened. “And I couldn’t become what I needed to be while it was attached.”

He straightened.

“You survived him,” Mojave said. “That matters.”

Rowan looked up at him, eyes hollow and burning. “I don’t feel human anymore.”

Mojave smiled.

“*Good.*”

Rowan’s hands flew up before they could stop themselves.

The instant their fingers drifted too close to the base of the antlers, pain exploded, not sharp, not brief, but blinding. White flooded their vision, enough to make them dizzy and sway. Something inside their skull screamed.

They cried out and jerked their hands away, folding forward hard, a strangled sound tearing out of their throat as their balance gave. Their forehead nearly hit the ground before they caught themselves, gasping.

“It— it feels like my head is burning,” Rowan choked, rocking faintly where they knelt. “Like— like my brain’s boiling. I can’t— I can’t think. I can’t—”

Their breath fractured into panicked gulps, chest hitching erratically.

“I want them off,” they sobbed. “I want them off, Mojave. Please. I want them gone so bad I feel *sick.*”

They dragged their hands down to their arms instead, nails biting into skin hard enough to hurt, hard enough to anchor them somewhere else. Their whole body shook, not just from the pain, but from the growing horror that their body no longer felt like theirs. Maybe never had been.

“And this—”

Their fingers brushed their ear by accident.

A soft, metallic jingle answered them.

Rowan froze.

Then something broke loose inside their chest, ugly and hysterical.

“He tagged me,” they whispered, voice shredding apart. “Like livestock. Like I’m—I’m owned.” Their eyes snapped up to Mojave, glassy and unfocused. “I can feel it every time I move. Every time I breathe. I hear it. I can’t make it stop.”

Mojave didn’t interrupt.

He watched, ears forward, posture loose but intent, the stillness of a predator who knew the chase was already over.

Rowan laughed again, high and cracked. “I keep thinking if I rip them out—if I just tear them out—maybe it’ll stop. Maybe I’ll feel like me again.” Their voice dropped, small and terrified. “But I don’t know who that is anymore.”

They curled inward, shoulders caving.

“I don’t even know if I deserve to take them off,” Rowan muttered. “Maybe this is—I don’t know—punishment.” Their jaw clenched. “For *Jane*. For *John*. For the *kid*. For *all* of them.” A bitter exhale. “Maybe this is what I’m supposed to look like now.”

That was when Mojave moved.

He crouched in front of them, tail stump twitching slowly behind him. He didn’t touch them, not yet, but his presence closed in, controlling and unavoidable.

“Pain makes thoughts sloppy,” he said quietly. “Especially head pain. It lies to you.”

Rowan let out a shaky breath. “It doesn’t feel like a lie.”

“No,” Mojave agreed. “It feels like truth when it’s loud enough.”

His gaze flicked to the antlers again, then to the tag.

“He didn’t give you those because you deserve them,” he continued. “He gave them to you so you’d stop remembering what you are without them.”

Rowan swallowed hard, tears spilling free despite their effort to hold them back. “I don’t want to be this.”

Something in Mojave’s expression softened, not kindness. Recognition.

“You won’t be,” he said. “Not forever.”

Rowan looked at him like they were drowning, desperate and raw. “Can you— can you take them off?” Their voice dropped to a whisper, practically a whimper. “Please.”

Mojave tilted his head, considering.

“Not here,” he said finally. “Not like this. You’re shaking. You’d bleed out. Or break.” A faint curve touched his mouth. “And *despite* what you think... I didn’t come all this way to lose you.”

Relief twisted with something darker in Rowan’s chest.

Mojave reached out at last, not for the antlers, not for the tag, but for their chin, lifting their face just enough to meet his eyes.

“Listen,” he said softly. “What he did wasn’t transformation. It was mutilation. Sloppy. Cruel.” Disdain flickered across his face. “He wanted you erased.”

His thumb brushed a tear from Rowan’s cheek.

“I want you *awake*.”

Rowan’s lips trembled. “I don’t know how to be awake without it hurting.”

Mojave smiled, not widely. Not cruelly either. But certain.

“You’ll learn,” he said. “Pain like this doesn’t end you. It sharpens you.” His eyes gleamed faintly. “And when those antlers come off... it won’t be because you begged.”

He straightened, offering a hand, steady, unapologetic.

“It’ll be because you decided what stays on your body,” he finished. “And what doesn’t.”

Rowan stared at his hand, trembling. The antlers cast long, warped shadows across the ground behind them.

For the first time since waking up in that basement,

They hesitated.

Their eyes burned. Tears slipped free anyway. Their shoulders shook, not with weakness, not anymore, but with the effort of holding themselves together while every nerve in their skull screamed.

They wanted the antlers gone so badly it made them dizzy.

Every breath dragged pain through their head. Every heartbeat struck bone like a hammer. Their fingers curled uselessly at their sides, twitching, wanting to claw, to tear, to undo..

But they didn't.

Not yet.

Rowan began to sway when they reached for Mojave's hand.

Mojave noticed.

He moved before Rowan could fold in on themselves again.

His hands closed around their shoulders, firm, grounding, not gentle but steady enough to stop the shaking. His grip anchored them in place, forcing their focus up instead of inward. Mojave glanced around, seeing Rowan empty handed.

"Hey," he said, sharper now. "Rowan, listen to me... Where's the shotgun?"

Rowan stiffened.

Their eyes slid away. Their jaw tightened. The pause was answer enough. Mojave was already getting skeptical.

"...I.. I gave it to him," Rowan muttered.

Mojave stared.

Not a blink. Not a twitch. Just a long, flat look that radiated *are you actually serious right now*.

"You—" He stopped. Inhaled through his nose. Exhaled slowly. "You *gave* it to **Atticus**."

Rowan winced. "I know."

"You handed.. a loaded *firearm*," Mojave said carefully, like he was explaining something to a particularly stupid child, "to the man I *explicitly* told you to *kill* on sight."

"I KNOW," Rowan snapped, shame flaring hot and ugly. "I know, okay? I get it."

Mojave's ears angled back. "Then explain."

Rowan swallowed hard, words coming out bitter and rushed, like ripping off a scab.

"He offered me a spare battery," they said. "For the car. I was just— I was gonna take it and leave. That was the plan." A hollow laugh. "Grab it, drive, never look back."

Mojave's eyes narrowed.

"But," Rowan continued, quieter now, "I couldn't stand the idea of you coming back and killing him."

That made Mojave blink.

Rowan pressed on, misery sharpening their voice. “I thought— if you showed up, if things went bad, I didn’t want him completely defenseless. I didn’t want it to be... easy.”

...

Mojave looked at them like he was reevaluating their entire existence.

“...And.. did he,” Mojave asked slowly, already knowing the answer, “actually have a spare car battery..?”

Rowan let out a humorless laugh. “No.”

Mojave’s brow twitched.

“It was a box,” Rowan said flatly. “A gift. Wrapped and everything.” Their lips curled. “Full of shit. *Literal* shit.”

...

...

Mojave turned his head slightly, jaw tightening, like he was physically restraining himself from laughing.

Rowan glared at him. “*Don’t.*”

That did it.

A short, sharp huff escaped Mojave before he could stop it. He straightened, dragging a hand down his face, shoulders shaking once with barely-contained amusement.

“*believable,*” he muttered. “You try to leave me... and you get **shit.**”

Rowan’s eyes burned. “This is not funny.”

Mojave glanced back at them, a crooked smile tugging at his mouth despite himself. “It’s a little funny.”

Rowan scowled. “I got kidnapped, mutilated, and turned into—” they gestured vaguely at their head “—a fucking art project.”

“Yes,” Mojave agreed. “Tragic.” Then, dry as dust, “But also karmic.”

Rowan shoved at his chest weakly. “You’re an asshole.”

Mojave caught their wrists easily, steadying them again before they could tip over. His amusement faded, replaced by something sharper.

“You tried to protect him,” he said. “From *me.*”

Rowan looked away. "I didn't want more blood."

Mojave studied them for a long moment.

"...That instinct," he said quietly, "is going to get you killed if you don't learn when to kill it."

Rowan didn't argue.

Mojave released them with a sigh. "Next time someone offers you a 'battery,'" he added, tone cool again, "you don't hand them a weapon. You take the gift. You *leave*. And if they don't like that?"

His eyes flicked toward the house behind them.

"You burn the place down."

Rowan snorted weakly despite themselves.

Mojave glanced back, unimpressed. "Don't laugh. You already tried mercy. Look how that worked out." His grip tightened, not enough to hurt, but enough to underline the point.

"*This*," he said, gesturing sharply at Rowan's head, the antlers, the tag, the blood still drying on their clothes, "is where your kindness gets you."

Rowan flinched.

"You didn't get robbed," Mojave continued, voice low and controlled. "You didn't get tricked out of money. You didn't get embarrassed." His ears flattened. "You got turned into a fucking deer."

Rowan swallowed, throat burning.

Mojave stepped closer, crowding their space without touching now. "Do you think Atticus is special?" he asked. "Do you think he's rare?"

Rowan didn't answer.

"He isn't," Mojave said. "He just isn't honest about enjoying it."

His gaze sharpened, pupils narrowing. "Men like him exist everywhere. Smiling. Offering help. Pretending to be harmless while they decide how they want to take you apart." His voice dropped. "I know that."

He leaned in, close enough that Rowan could feel his breath. "Everything I've done to you was to keep you from ending up exactly like this. In a cage. Tagged. Waiting to be harvested."

Rowan shook their head weakly. "You *drowned* me."

“Yes,” Mojave said calmly. “And you *lived*.”

His eyes flicked back to the house. “Atticus would’ve kept you alive just long enough to decide how entertaining you were.”

Silence stretched.

Then Mojave’s tone shifted coldy.

“You tried to leave *me*,” he said. “You tried to put someone else above *me*. Above your own survival.”

Rowan felt it then, the shift in the air. The danger snapping into place.

Mojave straightened, looming now. “*Don’t*.. do that again.”

Rowan’s breath came shallow. “Mojave—”

He grabbed their face, forcing their eyes up. Not rough. Absolute.

“If you ever try to leave *me* again,” he said quietly, “if you ever decide someone else deserves your trust more than *I* do—”

His claws pressed deep into their cheek, just enough to sting.

“—I *will* kill you *myself*.”

Rowan froze.

Not fear exactly. Something colder. Heavier.

Mojave’s gaze didn’t waver. “Because at least then,” he continued, voice almost gentle, “you won’t die screaming in someone else’s basement wondering why being kind wasn’t enough.”

He released Rowan abruptly.

“**Stay**,” he said. Not a plea. A command.

Rowan stood there shaking, antlers casting long, twisted shadows across the ground.

Kindness had gotten them caged.

Mercy had gotten them mutilated.

And now the only person who had come back for them was promising protection with a knife at their throat.

Rowan didn’t know whether to feel saved, or..

..or owned.

Mojave watched them.

Really watched this time.

Not with the usual sharp amusement or idle calculation, but with a stillness that meant he was taking inventory. His eyes traced the way Rowan stood, the tremor they couldn't quite suppress, the way their weight favored one side, the subtle hitch in their breathing every time the antlers pulled. Blood stiffened their hair. Their pupils were blown wide, glassy with pain and something feral beneath it.

Too injured.

Too hollowed out.

Too raw.

For once, Mojave didn't see a weapon waiting to be aimed. He saw something cracked open and bleeding, running on will alone.

"...You're a mess," he said at last, not unkindly. Just factual. Flat

Rowan let out a sound that scraped its way up from their chest, somewhere between a laugh and a choke. "You don't say."

Mojave's gaze lingered. The antlers. The tag. The blood crusted in their hair. The way Rowan refused to sit, refused to fold, as if stopping meant shattering completely, the way they swayed with unfocused eyes that had seen it all.

"This wasn't how I planned it," Mojave said after a moment. His ears angled back. "Sloppy. Excessive." A pause, irritation flickering through him.

"Annoying..."

He straightened, already turning away. "I'll deal with Atticus myself," Mojave continued calmly. "You bring the wagon around. We'll—"

Rowan moved.

Fast enough that it startled him.

Their hand shot out and clamped onto Mojave's arm, fingers digging in hard, too hard for someone who should've been conserving strength. Nails scraped skin. Fur pressed under their grip.

"No," Rowan said.

It wasn't pleading.

It was commanding.

Mojave froze.

Slowly, he turned his head back toward them. One ear flicked forward. His pupils narrowed, not with anger, but alert curiosity.

Rowan straightened despite the pain detonating through their skull. They stood taller, jaw set, still gripping his arm like they'd sink their teeth in if he tried to pull away.

"You don't get to take this from me," Rowan said. Their voice shook, but not with fear. With rage held on a short leash. "You sent me. You told me to do it." Their fingers tightened. "So don't you dare finish it for me."

Mojave said nothing.

Rowan stepped closer, breath ragged, eyes burning. "He touched my body. He decided what I was. He carved into me like I wasn't even there." Their lips peeled back slightly, something ugly and animal flashing through their expression. "I'm not letting him die quick. I'm not letting him think he won."

Their voice dropped, steady now. Dangerous.

"I'm going to give it back to him," Rowan said. "*Slowly.*"

Mojave's ears lifted fully.

Rowan kept going, words spilling like something that had finally torn free. "He called me stock. Inventory. Measured me like meat." A bitter, humorless laugh cut through their breath. "So I'm going to make him feel it. What it's like to be owned. To be helpless. To know someone else decides how long you get to breathe."

Their fingers trembled, but they didn't let go.

"I don't want you to help," Rowan finished hoarsely. "I want you to *watch.*"

Silence stretched between them.

Long.

Heavy.

Mojave studied Rowan's face, the focus there, the hatred sharpened into something clean and merciless. This wasn't fear masquerading as courage. This wasn't obedience or desperation.

This was intent.

And it stopped him.

Usually, Mojave had to push. Had to corner Rowan into action, strip away excuses, force their hand until they moved with shaking resolve and haunted eyes. Lately, their last few hunts had been... disappointing. Hesitation. Mercy. Guilt.

But this?

This was different.

This wasn't hunger for blood.

It was hunger for control.

A slow smile curved Mojave's mouth.

"*Well*," he murmured, low and almost pleased. "Look at you."

He carefully pried Rowan's fingers from his arm, not breaking the grip so much as easing it loose. Then he leaned in just enough to meet their gaze.

"I was wondering when you'd stop asking for permission," he said.

Rowan's chest heaved. "He doesn't get to live after what he did to me."

"No," Mojave agreed quietly. "He doesn't."

Something shifted in him then, dangerous pride, like a father watching their son hunt its first buck. Pure Satisfaction. The sense of a long, patient effort finally paying off.

"You're right," Mojave continued. "I sent you." His tail stump flicked once. "And I don't take my kills back."

He stepped aside, gesturing toward the dark mouth of the basement.

"Go," he said simply. "I'll make sure he doesn't run."

Then he paused.

"*Oh*,"

He reached behind the shed wall.

And tossed something forward.

Rowan caught it on instinct.

Metal. Familiar weight. Cold and solid.

The shotgun.

Mojave's shotgun.

He'd had it the whole time, retrieved it from Atticus's house long before. He just wanted to see if Rowan would lie about losing it.

Rowan stared down at it for half a second, breath hitching. Their fingers tightened around the grip, not hesitant this time. Certain. Like it had *always* belonged there.

The thing that once felt too heavy.

Too final.

Now it felt *right*.

Mojave watched their reaction closely. Then, satisfied, he nodded once.

“Go get that fucker,” he said.

No flourish. No *Philosophy*. No more bullshit.

Just **permission**.

Chapter 16: Twilight Time, A reprise

Chapter Summary

Main character gets their revenge   

I got on my LAPTOP to write this. I was in a flow state, yall.

Chapter Notes

⚠ TW!! ⚠

Gore, Torture, Lobotomization,

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Rowan didn't hesitate.

The door groaned shut behind them, and the basement swallowed the sound whole.

Down here, the air was thick with a metallic stale old suffering smell. It pressed against their lungs like a hand reminding them where they were. The lights flickered once, twice, then steadied into a dull, jaundiced glow that barely reached the corners.

Rowan descended anyway.

Step by step.

Each step sent a pulse of pain through their skull, antlers throbbing with every movement. Blood tugged painfully at their scalp. Their vision blurred at the edges.

But they didn't stop.

Each step was fueled by everything Atticus had taken. Every humiliation. Every touch. Every word that tried to erase their name.

Rowan didn't announce themselves. Didn't scream. Didn't rush.

They *hunted*.

No shaking. No bargaining thoughts. No quiet voice whispering *maybe don't*. That voice was gone. Burned out. There was only the hollow, humming calm that came after too much fear, after the mind decided it had nothing left to protect.

Their boots clicked softly against concrete.

Their hands were steady.

That was new.

The antlers scraped the low ceiling once, just enough to send a sharp vibration through their skull. The shadow they cast stretched ahead of them, twisted with every step, a distorted crown on the floor. The tag still in their ear.

They barely recognized the their own shadow.

Rowan saw it.

Felt it.

Their eye twitched hard.

This is what he made.

Not prey.

Not victim.

A display piece.

Their breath hitched, sharp and shallow, not from fear, but rage so concentrated it felt cold. Their fingers tightened around the shotgun. The metal was steady in their hands now. Familiar. Grounding.

Somewhere deeper in the basement, metal shrieked. A long, ugly sound. Saw teeth biting into something they shouldn't.

Rowan stopped walking.

Listened.

Their head tilted slightly, antlers catching the light as they turned. There was no confusion on their face, only confirmation. Atticus was still alive. Still busy. Still arrogant enough to think the basement belonged to him.

Their antlers pulsed again, a sharp consistent pain, like needles being pressed into bone. Rowan hissed through their teeth, fingers tightening on the shotgun. The pain didn't slow them. It reminded them.

His hands. His voice. The way he'd looked at them like they were property.

A slow breath in.

Rowan cocked the shotgun.

“*ATTICUS.*”

Their voice tore through the basement like a thrown blade. It echoed off concrete, pipes, doors, bouncing back distorted and angry, layered over itself until it sounded like more than one voice shouting his name.

Rowan didn’t flinch.

They started walking again.

Blood dried stiff across their clothes. Their hands were slick, their sleeves torn, their body screaming beneath the numbness, but none of it slowed them down. Each step was methodical, a movement of rage and intent.

“You wanted stock?” Rowan called out, voice shaking now, not weak, but electric.

“Inventory?”

Another step.

Another echo.

“Let’s *settle this.*”

They passed familiar landmarks, hooks, drains, the marks on the floor they’d tried not to look at before. This time, they looked directly at everything. Took it in. Claimed it.

The butcher room door loomed ahead.

Sealed shut with power.

Light leaked from beneath it in a thin, mocking line.

Rowan stopped just short of it.

This was it.

The room.

The room where Atticus had dragged them by the wrists. The room where he’d spoken softly while hurting them. The room where he’d sewn pain into their skull and called it necessary.

Rowan stepped closer. Their antlers throbbed violently, heat crawling along their scalp like live wire. Their hand twitched against the shotgun stock.

For the first time since this began, Rowan wasn’t running toward survival.

They were walking toward judgment.

And whatever was on the other side of that door

Was going to know *exactly* why.

They reached for the handle.

It didn't budge.

They knew it wouldn't be that easy.

Rowan frowned, and then noticed it. The faint hum. A vibration in the doorframe. Wires snaking out from the hinges and running along the walls like veins, splitting off toward a series of power boxes bolted into the concrete.

Of course.

Rowan laughed a sharp, ugly sound. They backed up a step, lifted the shotgun, and didn't even hesitate.

The first power box exploded in a shower of sparks and metal with a deafening *BOOM*. The lights overhead flickered violently.

Rowan turned smoothly, tracking the next box.

BOOM.

Another one went out, smoke curling up the wall, the hum in the air stuttering.

They moved like clock work now, pacing the perimeter of the basement, hunting each box like prey. Every pull of the trigger was controlled. Intentional. Rage, yes, but focused, sharpened into something deadly precise. Something made by Mojave.

BOOM.

BOOM.

The lights died section by section, plunging parts of the basement into shadow. The door's vibration weakened, the hum turning into a sick, uneven whine.

Rowan stopped in front of the last box.

They paused.

Their antlers screamed again, memory slamming into them all at once. *His voice. His hands.* The way he'd acted like this room was a sanctuary instead of a slaughterhouse.

Rowan leaned close to the box.

"You should've killed me," they whispered.

They fired.

The final box burst, sparks arcing wildly before going dark. Silence fell heavy and absolute.

Then,

Click.

The door unlocked.

Rowan turned slowly.

No hum, no power, no barrier left between them and him. Just wood. Just hinges. Just inevitability.

They rested the shotgun against their shoulder and stepped forward, every tremor in their body fueled by hate rather than fear.

They pulled.

Rowan stepped through the doorway, and the smell hit first.

Copper. Rot. Sweat. Ozone from overheated equipment.

The room hadn't changed.

If anything, it was worse.

Cameras lined the walls at every angle, their tiny red lights blinking patiently, recording every depraved snuff footage Atticus wanted. Hooks hung in neat rows. Restraints waited where they'd last been left. Tables were scarred with gouges and dark stains that no amount of scrubbing would ever erase. Trays of instruments lay arranged with loving precision, each blade polished, each tool placed exactly where a hand would expect it.

The walls were thick with ugly soundproofing padding meant to swallow screams before they could become real.

And in the center of it,

Atticus.

Bent over a body strapped to the table, movements unhurried, practiced. He wore black leather pulled tight over his frame, face hidden behind the grotesque mask, breathing steady and almost... peaceful. One gloved hand pressed down, the other slick with blood, working with intimate familiarity, a scream cut short by Atticus's saw. Rowan would've grimaced at the sight of the animal's head falling from its torso, had they not seen it already.

Rowan raised the shotgun without a tremor.

"Atticus..."

The name cracked through the room like a gunshot.

He froze.

The saw wound down, whining softly before dying

Slowly... very slowly.. Atticus straightened and turned his masked head toward Rowan. He didn't reach for a weapon. Didn't flinch. Just tilted his head, raising his hands into the air, considering.

Then he chuckled.

"Well now," he drawled, voice muffled but unmistakably smug. "Ain't this somethin'. You're standin' up a lot better than I expected."

He glanced back at the body on the table, almost regretful. "Unfortunate you had to cut this short, pal. If you'd just waited a little longer, you'd've been next" A small sigh. "It was gonna be real special. Had it all planned out."

Rowan's grip tightened. The barrel tracked his head perfectly.

"What a shame," Atticus went on, turning fully now. "You're a lot more resourceful than you look. I could ask how you got out, but..." he shrugged lightly. "Don't matter now, does it?"

His head tilted again.

"That look on your face," he said. "You're judgin' me."

Rowan's jaw clenched so hard it hurt.

"But I reckon everybody's entitled to a little pleasure in this life," Atticus continued easily. "Every single soul who ended up in this room walked through my door of their own accord. Lookin' for help." He let out a low laugh. "Just like you did."

Rowan's antlers throbbed, heat blooming behind their eyes.

"Most didn't barge in, though," Atticus said mildly. "When folks get desperate, they'll grab hold of anything. Some'll drink their *own* piss thinkin' it'll cure 'em. Hope's sweeter than sense, I suppose." His shoulders lifted in a small shrug. "People will walk straight into hell if you hold the door open *nice* enough."

He gestured around the room. "Truth is, we're all a little crooked. Only difference is how deep the bend goes. People size up danger and think—are you more screwed up than me? *No*? Then I'm safe."

A pause.

"Guess I'm just better at hidin' it than most."

His gaze locked onto Rowan through the mask.

"And somethin' tells me *you* are too."

Rowan's antlers burned. Their vision tunneled.

His masked gaze fixed on Rowan. "You pretendin' this is about justice.. About makin' things right." A quiet laugh slipped out. "But I see it. You're enjoyin' this."

Rowan's finger twitched.

"The real you," Atticus said softly, "is thrilled to have that shotgun pointed at my head. You're *excited* to hear the *crunch*. To see the *spray*. To watch my body go *limp*."

Rowan's finger twitched on the trigger.

"You *like* havin' the power," Atticus said gently. "You *like* hearin' me talk while you decide how long I get to breathe." He spread his hands a fraction. "That thrill? That's not new. That's just you stoppin' the act."

He chuckled, "Maybe you're just as bad as that son of a bitch, *Mojave*," Atticus went on. "Funny thing is... this must be how it felt for all of 'em in this room." He laughed quietly. "I've been at it so long.. but I actually like this. It's new. I've never felt so powerless before."

He spread his hands slightly. "Well. You've heard my piece. What now, pal? You gonna kill me?"

Rowan didn't answer.

They pulled the trigger.

The blast was deafening.

Atticus screamed as the shot tore through his shoulder, spinning him back into the equipment rack. He slammed into the wall, collapsing hard, blood splattering across the floor and his precious tools.

Rowan didn't lower the gun. They just stared down at his writhing body with silent, cold, satisfaction. "Oh *Atticus*.. You think death is the worst outcome," they said, echoing his own words back at him. "That's very... *human* of you."

Atticus panted, clutching the ruined limb, laughter bubbling through the pain. "Ah—hah—*fuck*," he wheezed. "You see? I-I knew it.. that's the *real* you.."

Rowan turned away from him.

Their gaze caught on the record player in the corner.

The vinyl sat beside it, half out of its sleeve.

"*Twilight Time*" by The Platters.

The same song.

The one he'd played while torturing them.

Something in Rowan's face broke, not into fear, not into grief, but into something flat and lethal.

They crossed the room slowly.

Each step measured.

They lifted the needle.

The music crackled to life, soft and syrup-sweet, filling the butcher room with warmth it didn't deserve.

Atticus laughed weakly. "Oh.. now *that's* just *cruel*," he rasped.

Rowan didn't look at him.

They turned the volume up.

And let the song play.

Rowan's gaze then drifted past Atticus. Past the blood pooling beneath him. Past the twitching hand clawing uselessly at the floor.

It locked onto the drill.

The drill.

It lay where Atticus had left it, abandoned on a stainless tray like an afterthought. Dried blood darkened the grooves along the bit. Clotted flakes ringed the chuck. A thin smear still marked the handle where Rowan's own blood had been wiped away too casually, like residue, not evidence.

Their breath went shallow.

Their skull *remembered* before their mind did.

Pressure.

Heat.

Their skull lit up all at once, phantom heat, phantom pressure. The sound came back first, that awful, rising whine as the bit spun faster. The vibration that rattled their teeth. The way Atticus had leaned close, voice calm, almost tender, while something foreign was forced through bone and into them.

The scream trapped behind their teeth while the world narrowed to vibration and white noise and the awful certainty that something was being *forced* where it did not belong.

Rowan's antlers throbbed in response, a deep, nauseating pulse that made their vision blur.

The shotgun felt suddenly wrong in their hands.

Too distant.

Too fast.

Too.. *clean*.

They let it slip from their fingers.

It hit the floor with a hollow clatter and skidded away, forgotten.

No.

That would have been mercy.

Rowan stepped toward the tray.

Their movements were slow now. Almost numb.

They picked up the drill.

It was heavier than they thought. Warmed by the room, by use. When their finger brushed the trigger, a phantom vibration ran up their arm, setting every nerve in their head screaming in anticipation.

The record player crackled softly behind them.

"Heavenly shades of night are falling..."

Sweet. Too romantic for something obscene.

Rowan turned.

Atticus was slumped against the wall, blood pooling beneath him, leather soaked dark and slick. His breathing was ragged, each inhale a wet, hitching sound. One arm hung useless at his side, ruined.

Rowan approached anyway.

Step.

Step.

Step.

Each footfall timed to the slow sway of the music.

The drill dangled at their side, cord trailing behind like a leash, the weight grounding, familiar in a way that made their mouth twitch, not into a smile yet, but something close.

Their antlers cast long, warped shadows across the walls, crawling over Atticus like grasping hands.

Atticus laughed weakly.

“*There* it is,” he said, voice trembling with pain and something like triumph. “I knew it. You really *are* like Mojave.”

Rowan stopped.

The drill hung loosely at their side. Suddenly Mojave’s name felt wrong in his mouth.

“...You don’t get to say *his name*,”

The words came out low and razor-edged, stripped of hysteria. There was no shaking in their voice. No plea. Just possession.

Atticus’s breath hitched as they closed the distance again.

Up close, he could see it now.

Not fear.

Decision.

Atticus knew this was it. Knew it'd be horrific. Knew the suffering to come. Knew it'd be the greatest snuff film yet.

“Do me a favor,” Atticus rasped, blood bubbling at the corner of his mouth. “Be sure to record this.”

Rowan smiled.

It wasn’t wide.

It wasn’t manic.

It was precise.

“Oh,” they said coldly. “*Every second.*”

They reached the table and kicked it once hard, sending instruments clattering to the floor. Atticus flinched, a sharp jolt tearing out of him before he could stop it.

Rowan tilted their head.

“...Bad posture,” they said mildly. “You’re slouching.”

They grabbed him by the collar and yanked him upright, forcing his spine straight against the wall. He groaned, the movement tearing at his shoulder.

“Stock needs to be *maintained*,” Rowan went on, voice even. “Can’t let it collapse under its own weight, *right*?”

They reached out, not to strike yet, not to rush, but to tilt his head back just enough, fingers firm at his jaw. The drill hovered inches from his skull, close enough that he could feel the heat of it, hear the faint whine as Rowan *tested* the trigger.

A brief squeeze.

The motor purred to life.

Atticus jerked, a sharp sound tearing from his throat despite himself.

Rowan leaned closer, voice low, almost casual beneath the romantic vinyl.

“You always *loved* this part,” Rowan murmured. “Explaining it. Making it sound reasonable. Necessary.” A pause. “You made it sound like we weren’t even people.. just.. a *chore*.”

They shifted the drill, pressing the cold bit against his forehead.

Atticus’s weak laugh caught in his throat, a choking rasp.

Rowan pressed the drill closer, so close the buzzing metal hummed across Atticus’s skull. “I know,” Rowan whispered, voice chillingly intimate, “I *remembered* it all. The way you measured me, touched me, drilled me. How you decided my body, my pain, my life. You enjoyed it. *Every* second. *Every* flicker of fear. You taught me how it feels to be property,” they hissed, almost. “I learned.. *Every* movement, *every* trembling breath, every shiver of panic... you *drilled* it into me

They tapped the drill lightly against his shoulder. “Now it’s your turn. You will feel it. Every second. Every helpless, screaming moment. Stock does not speak. You don’t get comfort. You *don’t get mercy*. Not anymore.”

Atticus struggled, weak, blood dripping onto the floor, every movement labored.

“And I *do so* love unwrapping things *slowly*,” Rowan continued, mockingly sweet, echoing his voice back at him. “Don’t you?”

They adjusted the angle with clinical care. Measured and precise. Just like he had.

The drill’s bit kissed his skin.

Just barely.

“This isn’t punishment,” they echoed, almost gently.

The music swelled.

"...*I'll hear you, my dear, at Twilight time...*"

And Rowan pressed in.

Not fast.

Not sloppy.

Exactly the way he had.

“This is *correction*.”

The drill whined to life.

Atticus’s scream didn’t stay in the room.

It tore out through the vents, crawled through the ductwork, ricocheted off concrete corridors and metal doors, then snapped off mid-note like someone had slammed a hand over his mouth.

For a beat, the basement held its breath.

Then the drill answered.

That high, hungry whine, mechanical and steady, threaded through the dark like a siren that didn’t warn. It invited.

Mojave took the stairs down two at a time.

Not rushing in panic. More like... compelled. Irritated at first, then curious, then sharpened into something far more focused as the screaming stopped and the drill kept going.

The air thickened the deeper he went. Damp concrete. Old blood. Disinfectant failing to pretend. He stepped over a trail of smears, pawz crunching faintly on grit that he shook off, and followed the sound.

The first room he passed was the cage hall.

And Mojave slowed.

Rows and rows of cramped metal. Too many bodies. Too many eyes. Some staring like cornered animals. Some staring like they’d already left their bodies and forgot to tell them. A few reached weakly through bars when they noticed him, fingers shaking, desperate for anyone who wasn’t Atticus.

Mojave’s brow lifted.

“...Well,” he muttered, almost offended on principle. “Sucks to be you..”

He shrugged.

He walked along the cages like he was browsing a market, head tilting here and there. The notes taped to posts. The little “reminders” in Atticus’s scrawl. The crude organization disguised as “care.” It all reeked of someone who wanted to be seen as thoughtful while doing something vile.

His ears flicked forward at another sound, metal clinking, a distant muffled thump, and the cheesey romantic melody of "*Twilight Time*" By The Platters, then the drill rose again, steady, unwavering.

Mojave’s tail stilled.

“Found you,” he breathed.

He didn’t linger.

He kept walking, past the cages, past a doorway with fresh scratches in the frame, past a wet trail that wasn’t water, until the butcher room door came into view.

Light leaked under it, bright and thin. Like the room was smiling.

The drill whined.

A muffled, strangled noise followed, half pain, half rage, half humiliation, all of it swallowed by whatever Atticus had built into the walls to keep suffering private.

Mojave’s hand tightened around the cleaver.

He pushed the door open.

And *Froze*.

Warmth hit him first. Not cozy warmth, heat from equipment and stale air trapped too long. The room’s lights were too steady for the rest of the basement, like Atticus had made sure this place always performed.

Cameras stared from the corners.

Tables gleamed with that sterile, obsessive order.

And in the middle of it,

Rowan.

Blood dark clothes clinging to them. Antlers casting that warped demonic like shadow across the floor. Shoulders rigid, stance planted like they’d been nailed into place by fury alone. The drill in their hands was angled with sick intent, the cord trailing behind like a tail.

Mojave’s pupils *dilated*.

Slowly.

His ears lifted, standing tall and alert.

For a long moment, he didn't move at all.

Didn't speak.

Didn't blink.

He just.. watched.

There was no calculation in his eyes now. No planning. No assessment of risk or efficiency.

"...Here in the sweet and same old way..."

Only awe.

"...I fall in love again, as I did then..."

The drill's eager whine filling the room, drowning out the distant, haunting melody of the record player

Atticus was on the floor near the wall, twisted and scrambling, trying to push himself away with one good arm, his ruined shoulder dragged uselessly. The mask on his face didn't help him now. It only made the sounds worse, muffled and wet and animal.

Rowan didn't look at Mojave.

Bro was *locked* in.

Focus so hard it looked calm.

All that existed in this moment was the pounding of their own heart, the grim determination settling in their gut, and the primal urge to make Atticus pay for every violation, every degradation, every moment of humiliation he had inflicted upon them.

Atticus tried to speak, tried to force words through the lobotomization, but all that came out was a broken, garbled plea that died under the drill's steady whine.

Rowan leaned in closer.

Not hurried.

Not trembling.

Measured.

The way Atticus had been measured.

The way inventory was handled.

The drill bit began to sink into the flesh, a slow, inexorable descent as Rowan applied steady pressure. Blood welled up around the invading metal, the crimson fluid beading and then flowing freely as the skin split.

Atticus jerked and kicked, heel scraping the concrete, nails clawing at nothing. His breath hitched, frantic, then fractured into another muffled scream that didn't get to be a scream for long.

Rowan didn't flinch.

They adjusted their grip, just a fraction, like someone correcting posture.

They watched, almost clinically, as the drill punctured the skull, the bone yielding with a sickening crunch. Flecks of blood and bone shavings spray painted the drill bit, the handle slick and warm in Rowan's tightening grasp.

And the drill kept singing.

Mojave... *stopped* breathing.

It wasn't dramatic. He simply forgot.

His eyes stayed widened, pupils swallowing the light, ears angled forward like he couldn't afford to miss a sound. The cleaver hung loose at his side, suddenly irrelevant.

"...Deep In the dark your kiss will thrill me like days of old..."

Suddenly beneath the moment. In that moment, he beheld a kindred spirit, someone who had been forged in the same crucible of anguish and emerged with the same dark appetites.

He stared at Rowan the way a starving thing stares at a table set for it.

Like someone standing in a gallery, studying brushstrokes.

Not because of the blood.

Not even because of Atticus.

Because of the *stillness* in Rowan's hands.

Because of what was missing.. the guilt, the hesitation, the constant back-and-forth of conscience that Mojave had always had to pry apart with his claws.

Rowan wasn't asking permission.

Rowan wasn't bargaining with themselves.

Rowan wasn't trying to be "good."

They were simply... *doing* it.

And in that quiet, unwavering intent, Mojave saw something snap into place that he'd been trying to force for far too long.

Mojave felt something settle in his chest, deep and slow, like a lock clicking into place after years of forcing the wrong key.

So this is what you look like when you stop holding back, he thought.

A low sound escaped him, half laugh, half exhale, half something almost fond.

"...*Oh,*" Mojave whispered.

"...Lighting the spark of love that fills me with dreams untold..."

His gaze dragged over the antlers, the tag, the way Rowan's jaw was clenched so hard it looked like it could crack. Mojave turned and saw the shotgun lay discarded against the wall, forgotten entirely. Rowan had chosen weight. Chosen closeness. Chosen to feel every impact travel up their arms, into their shoulders, into their chest.

Up close.

Personal.

Unavoidable

He looked at Atticus again, suddenly small, suddenly pathetic, suddenly not the author of the room anymore.

Then back to Rowan.

And Mojave stayed froze there in the doorway like an intruder in his own story.

Like he'd walked in expecting to rescue his little human...

...and found it had evolved without him.

Atticus made another muffled sound, desperate, pleading through the mask, something that might've been a name, might've been an apology, might've been a perverted request, might've been anything.

But it didn't matter.

Rowan didn't answer.

The drill whined. The sound of the drill mixed with the wet, sloppy noises of brain matter being violated, the horrible symphony rising to a crescendo.

Atticus' body jerked again, then sagged, then fought again, refusing to let go even as the room swallowed every proof of it.

Mojave's throat bobbed as he swallowed.

"...Each day I pray for evening just to be with you..."

His grip on the cleaver loosened further.

He didn't step in.

He didn't interrupt.

He watched, wide-eyed, almost... stunned.

And when Rowan shifted their weight, steady as stone, and the drill's pitch changed for a split second,

Mojave's mouth curved.

Slow.

Proud.

Dangerously fond.

Like he'd just seen something priceless crack open.

"...That's *my* fucking student," he murmured under his breath, not even trying to hide the awe anymore.

"...Together at last at Twilight time..."

He took one quiet step into the room.

Then another.

Not to stop it.

Not to help.

Just to watch *Rowan*.

"Together..."

At last at

Twilight time..."



And then they kissed and lived happily ever after. The end. Frfr. Mozeltoff 🎉🎉👍

Chapter 17: Welcome Mat

Chapter Summary

MC and Mojave bond

Chapter Notes

HAPPY NEW YEARSSS 🎉 I hope everyone had a fantastic new years. I was up all night with my best friend watching them play Cat Named Mojave for the first time. I made him play it to explore the map more to see if we can find any hidden lore or easter eggs that I could use for this fanfic, and we did find quite a lot of unseen things that I haven't seen Caseoh or Jay discover before! Nothing TOO major lore wise, unfortunately, but small things I plan to implement into the story. I may post some snippets of it when I get the chance.

Anyway, I'm so glad you guys love the fanfic so far. It means a lot to me more than you know. I've never had these many people interested in my writing. I'm surprised some of you took your time to read this during New years instead of celebrating the holiday with family like normal people, but hey, I also spent the new year writing this too so.. I got nothing better to do either, with college over and everything. Well, enjoy the new chapter! I really fucked around in this one

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

As the drill finally pierced the back of the skull, Rowan flicked the switch, the machine falling silent. Blood and brain matter dripped from the bit, painting a macabre abstract on the cold concrete floor. Rowan stood back, chest heaving, the drill still gripped tightly in their hand, and surveyed their handiwork.

Atticus's eyes stared sightlessly at the ceiling, his mouth slack and dripping with the remnants of his final, strangled cries. The creature's head was a ruin, the once sharp mind now turned to jelly, the cruel intelligence evaporated like mist beneath the rising sun. Rowan had lobotomized him, had stripped him of everything that had once made him a man. They had made him into a vegetable, a broken husk of his former self.

And it felt complete.

For a few long seconds, nothing happened.

No screams. No machinery. No orders barked or begged for.

Just the low hum of the lights and the wet, coppery stillness hanging in the room.

Blood soaked their sleeves, their hands, their chest, dark and tacky, cooling against their skin. The drill dangled uselessly at their side, its motor whining down into silence. Atticus lay slumped where he'd fallen, breathing shallow, eyes unfocused, mouth moving around sounds that no longer meant anything.

Finished.

That was the word that surfaced.

Not victorious. Not relieved. Not even satisfied.

Finished.

Rowan tilted their head back slightly, eyes closing as exhaustion slammed into them all at once. It wasn't gentle. It was a wave, heavy and total, washing through muscle and bone, making their knees wobble. Their antlers throbbed faintly, a distant pressure now instead of a screaming wound. Even that pain felt... removed. Like it belonged to another version of them that had already burned away.

When they opened their eyes again, the room swam.

Mojave was still there.

Standing a few paces back. Silent. Watching.

Rowan didn't look at him right away.

Their legs finally gave out, and they sank to their knees in the blood-slicked concrete with a soft, hollow sound. The drill slipped from their fingers and clattered away, spinning once before coming to rest near the wall.

Rowan didn't react.

They stared at the floor. At nothing. At the dark, reflective sheen beneath them.

Whatever part of them used to flinch was gone.

The old Rowan, the one who shook, who begged, who whispered *this is wrong* even while their hands were forced would have broken at the sight of this room. Would have been sick. Would have sobbed or frozen or run.

But that version felt distant now. Almost fictional.

They felt... quiet.

Not empty.

Just still.

The antlers didn't feel foreign anymore. Neither did the tag. Neither did the blood. They were just facts now. Things that existed. Things that had happened.

Mojave moved.

Slowly.

His paws made soft, wet sounds as he crossed the room, careful not to startle them. Not because he feared Rowan, he didn't, but because something in the moment demanded respect. He stopped beside them, close enough that Rowan could feel the warmth of him without looking up.

For once, he didn't loom.

He crouched.

"...You didn't hesitate," he said quietly.

Not praise.

Not accusation.

Observation.

Rowan didn't answer. They couldn't. Their throat worked uselessly as they dragged in air, eyes unfocused, jaw trembling.

Mojave exhaled softly, something like a sigh slipping out of him. "You didn't even *look* at me."

A faint, almost pleased sound touched his voice.

"That's new."

Not praise. Not mockery.

Acknowledgment.

Rowan swallowed, throat tight, eyes still unfocused. "He's... not gone," they murmured. "But he's not... there either."

Mojave's gaze flicked briefly toward Atticus's limp form, then back to Rowan. "That's worse," he said simply. "For him."

Rowan nodded once, almost absent.

"I thought I'd feel something," they admitted. "I thought there'd be... something. Relief. Closure. I don't know."

"And?" Mojave prompted.

Rowan shook their head. "I just feel... done."

Mojave studied them carefully now, not for weakness, not for leverage, but for truth. His ears angled forward, tail still. The usual hunger in his eyes wasn't gone, but it had changed shape.

"That's not nothing," he said. "That's what comes after."

Rowan finally looked up at him.

Really looked.

For the first time since the desert, since the tub, since the cages, Mojave wasn't above them. Wasn't framed as a threat or a captor or a looming force. He was just... there. On the same level. Blood on both of them. The same room bearing witness.

"I don't feel human," Rowan said again quietly.

Mojave's mouth twitched, thoughtful. "Human isn't a fixed state," he replied. "It's a story people tell themselves so they can sleep at night."

Rowan huffed a weak, humorless breath. "That supposed to make me feel better?"

"No," Mojave said. "It's supposed to make you stop asking the wrong question." He shifted slightly closer, resting his forearms on his knees. His voice lowered, intimate but not possessive.

"You weren't broken in that basement," he continued. "You were revealed. Atticus didn't make you this." A pause. "He just forced the timing."

Rowan's jaw tightened. "You sent me here."

"Yes," Mojave said easily.

Rowan bristled, a flash of anger cutting through the haze. "So don't act like—"

"I'm not absolving myself," Mojave interrupted, calm but firm. "I'm saying this moment belongs to you. Not me. Not him."

Silence settled again.

Rowan's shoulders sagged. "I don't know what I am now."

Mojave considered that.

Then, unexpectedly, he smiled, not wide, not sharp. Something smaller. Almost... fond.

"You're someone who chose," he said. "Not out of fear. Not because you were told. You looked at what he did to you and decided he wouldn't define the ending."

He gestured vaguely around the room. "That matters."

He reached out and gently, almost carefully brushing dried blood from Rowan's cheek with his thumb. Rowan didn't recoil. Didn't lean into it either. Just let it happen.

"You stopped asking whether you deserved it," Mojave continued. "That's the difference."

Rowan closed their eyes. Their head tipped back against the machinery with a soft thunk.

"I kept thinking... if I hurt enough, maybe it meant something. Maybe it balanced out." Their voice cracked, not breaking, just bending. "But I don't even care about that now."

Mojave's pupils widened slightly.

"What do you care about?" he asked.

Rowan opened their eyes again.

"Never letting anyone do that to me again," they said. No tremor. No uncertainty. "And making sure people like him don't get to pretend they're kind."

A pause.

Then, quieter, "I don't think I can go back to who I was. Even if I wanted to."

Mojave straightened slowly.

"You couldn't," he said simply. "Even if you begged."

Rowan studied him for a long moment. "Is that supposed to scare me?"

Mojave tilted his head. A faint curve touched his mouth, not cruel, not soft. Something approving.

"No," he said. "It's supposed to *free* you."

Rowan exhaled, long and slow, like they'd been holding their breath for years. Their shoulders sank further into the metal.

"...Okay," they murmured.

The word wasn't agreement.

It was acceptance.

Mojave rose to his feet and offered a hand, not urgent, not demanding. Just there.

Not commanding. Not ownership. Not this time. An offer.

"Come on," he said. "You don't belong on the floor anymore."

Rowan stared at his hand.

Then, slowly, they took it.

Rowan barely made it upright.

Their knees locked for half a second, then betrayed them.

They swayed, vision tunneling, and before they could even pretend to catch themselves, their hands came up and grabbed Mojave's arms. Fingers dug in reflexively, not asking permission, just clinging. Too close. Chest almost brushing his coat. Their forehead dipped toward his shoulder without thinking.

“—*shit*,” Rowan breathed.

The room tilted. Blood rushed in their ears, loud and hollow, like standing too close to a train. The pain in their head surged again, sharp enough to make their teeth chatter. Every tiny movement tugged at the sutures beneath the antlers, a deep, grinding pressure that felt like their skull was being split open from the inside.

Mojave stiffened for half a heartbeat.

Then he steadied them.

His hands came up, not gentle, not rough, firm at Rowan's upper arms, claws dimpling fabric as he anchored them in place. He smelled blood, iron and sweat and something feverish. His ears flicked, catching the hitch in Rowan's breathing.

Rowan swallowed hard, eyes half-lidded. “I—” Their voice wobbled despite their effort to keep it sharp. “I don't think I can stay awake.”

They laughed weakly, the sound fraying at the edges. “Everything's... buzzing. And my head—god, it hurts. The antlers are—” They sucked in a breath through clenched teeth. “They're *killing* me..”

Their grip tightened without realizing it, knuckles white against Mojave's fur.

“I can feel my heartbeat in them,” Rowan muttered. “Like it's trying to hammer its way out.”

Mojave's gaze flicked up, tracing the antlers again. He could see the strain now, the way Rowan's posture fought gravity, the faint tremor running through their legs. He clicked his tongue softly.

“You're crashing,” he said. Not a question. “No food. No rest. Too much blood loss. Too much adrenaline.”

Rowan huffed. “Wow. *Gold star*.”

Their head dipped again, heavier this time. Their forehead brushed Mojave's collarbone. They froze for a second, like they'd crossed a line by accident, but they didn't pull away.

“I’m so tired,” they whispered. Not dramatic. Just fact. “If I close my eyes, I think I might just... *drop*.”

Mojave adjusted his grip, sliding one arm more securely around Rowan’s back, claws pressing into muscle through fabric to keep them upright. His tail stump lashed once behind him, irritated, not at Rowan, but at the situation.

“You’re not passing out here,” he said quietly. “Not in this room.”

Rowan’s lips twitched. “Wasn’t planning on it,” they murmured. “Just... don’t know how much longer I’ve got.”

Another wave of pain rolled through their skull, and they hissed sharply, shoulders jerking. Tears pricked at the corners of their eyes, not from emotion, just nerves screaming.

“*God*, Mojave,” they muttered, voice cracking despite themselves. “I want them off. I want them off so *bad*.”

Mojave’s ears angled back slightly.

“Easy,” he said, low and steady, closer now. “You start ripping at those, you’ll bleed out.”

Rowan gave a humorless laugh. “Figures.”

Their grip slackened, strength draining fast, weight sagging more fully into him. It wasn’t trust. It was survival. Their body choosing the nearest solid thing and refusing to let go.

“Just—” Rowan whispered, words blurring. “Just don’t let me fall asleep standing up. That’d be embarrassing.”

Mojave snorted softly despite himself.

He tightened his hold, anchoring them completely now, his stance widening to take their weight. “You’re not dying on your feet,” he said. “You’ve already done enough for one day.”

Rowan’s breathing slowed, uneven but easing, head lolling slightly against him.

“...Okay,” they murmured again.

And this time, the word sounded dangerously close to surrender.

Mojave noticed it before Rowan did.

That slow dangerous sag, the way their eyes unfocused, chin dipping, breath slipping out too long. The body giving up before the mind finished processing what it had survived.

“Hey,” Mojave said sharply.

Rowan didn’t answer.

Their lashes fluttered. Knees buckled a fraction.

Mojave exhaled through his nose. Annoyed. Calculating.

Then his hand came up and grabbed one of the antlers.

Not gently.

He wrapped his fingers around the base where bone met swollen flesh and twisted just enough.

Rowan screamed.

It ripped out of them raw, animalistic. White-hot pain detonated behind their eyes, lightning straight through their skull. Their whole body jerked back violently, hands flying up as if they could claw the pain away.

“*FUCK—!*” Rowan staggered away from Mojave, heart slamming, vision exploding into stars. They nearly fell again, but this time from shock, not exhaustion. Their breath came in sharp, panicked gasps, every nerve shrieking.

They stared at Mojave like he’d just stabbed them.

“What the *fuck* is wrong with you?!” Rowan barked hoarsely, clutching the side of their head, fingers trembling inches from the antler but not daring to touch it again. “Are you trying to kill me?!”

Mojave shrugged, utterly unbothered.

“You were fading,” he said calmly. “Pain works.”

Rowan was still panting, chest heaving, pupils blown wide. Their legs shook as adrenaline flooded back in, cruel and immediate. Tears leaked from the corners of their eyes, their nervous system short-circuiting.

“Jesus Christ,” Rowan hissed. “You’re unbelievable.”

Mojave flicked a glance towards Atticus’s barely conscious body on the floor. “We’re not done,” he added. “We still need to get him upstairs. Wagon’s waiting.”

Rowan’s gaze drifted slowly back to the floor.

To Atticus.

What was left of him.

The body sagged awkwardly against the wall, chest rising in shallow, uneven motions that barely counted as breath anymore. His head lolled at an unnatural angle, jaw slack, eyes unfocused and glassy, staring at nothing. Blood pooled beneath the table legs and crept outward in thin, dark fingers across the concrete.

He looked small now.

Reduced.

Rowan watched him for a long moment, expression unreadable.

Then they looked back at Mojave.

“You... really want *him*,” Rowan asked quietly, voice hoarse, flat. Not accusing. Not incredulous. Just trying to understand. “As a trophy?”

Mojave followed their line of sight, eyes tracing Atticus’s ruined form with open, unapologetic interest. He hummed under his breath, thoughtful.

“Don’t *you*?” he replied.

The question hung there.

Rowan opened their mouth, then closed it again. Their jaw worked once, a muscle jumping as something bitter twisted through their chest. They hadn’t thought that far ahead. Hadn’t thought beyond ending it. Beyond making him stop.

They looked back at the body again, at the ruined thing that had taken pieces of them they’d never get back.

A long silence stretched between them.

“...Yeah,” Rowan said finally.

The word came out low. Certain.

They stepped forward despite the protest in their skull, jaw clenched against another spike of pain. They grabbed hold of Atticus’s arm, grimacing at the weight, at the slickness of blood soaking into their sleeves.

“Let’s get this over with,” Rowan muttered.

Mojave’s ears twitched forward.

Together, they dragged the body, metal scraping, boots slipping, blood squeaking. It was ugly. Awkward. Exhausting. Rowan stumbled more than once, vision swimming, but they didn’t stop.

Didn’t let go.

At the base of the stairs, Rowan had to pause, bent over, hands on their knees, breath shaking.

“Don’t fall asleep,” Mojave said dryly.

Rowan shot him a glare through blood-matted lashes. “Touch my antlers again and I’ll break your fingers.”

Mojave huffed. Almost amused. Had Rowan threatened him any other time, Mojave would've put them in their place instantly, but he was too proud with Rowan's new found hostility to even feel offended.

They hauled Atticus upward inch by inch, toward the night air, toward the wagon, toward whatever came next.

And even as their head screamed and their body begged for rest, Rowan stayed awake.

They made sure of it.

Mojave noticed it in the quiet moments.

Not the obvious things, the way Rowan walked like something feral and newly born. No. It was smaller than that. The way Rowan's threats landed now. The way they didn't flinch when Mojave looked at them sideways. The way they said things once and meant them.

That was new.

And Mojave liked it.

A lot.

They got Atticus, what remained, secured onto the wagon with rough efficiency. Rowan's hands moved automatically, competent despite the tremor in them, despite the way their head throbbed like it was trying to split itself open.

When Rowan muttered, "If he rolls off, I'm not catching him," Mojave actually laughed.

Not loud. Just a low huff through his nose.

Once the wagon started moving, the desert swallowed the sounds behind them. Night stretched wide and indifferent, stars sharp as glass overhead. Mojave walked beside Rowan instead of ahead for once, matching their pace without comment.

Mojave kept Rowan close as they moved, close enough to steady them if their legs gave out again, but not touching unless he had to. He walked like this was nothing. Like hauling a half-dead owl out of a slaughter room was just... errands.

The wagon creaked as Mojave adjusted the ropes, testing the knots with practiced hands. Atticus lay bound and unmoving, a grotesque, sagging weight in the bed of it. Blood dripped through the slats and darkened the sand below.

Mojave straightened, rolling one shoulder, and glanced down at the body with open curiosity.

"...Y'know," he mused casually, as if commenting on the weather, "I haven't decided yet what I'm going to make out of him."

Rowan didn't look up. Their eyes stayed on the blood pooling along the grout lines, watching it creep like it had all the time in the world.

Mojave continued anyway, because of course he did. “A *giant owl*,” he mused, circling a half-step to get a better angle, ears twitching as he studied Atticus’s feathers, the breadth of his frame. “That’s... thematically satisfying. Plenty of material to work with.”

Rowan’s mouth twitched barely, like their face had forgotten how to make expressions but their body still knew the shape of cynicism.

Mojave’s tail stump flicked once, pleased with his own thoughts. “I could mount him. Wings out. Hang him in the entryway like a warning sign. Real... welcome home energy.”

Rowan’s eyes finally lifted, dull and glassy. “Nothing says *hospitality* like a dead owl above the coat rack.”

Mojave’s lips curled. “Exactly.”

He tapped one claw against his chin, looking genuinely contemplative now, like this was the most serious decision he’d made all week.

“Or,” he went on, “I could make something functional. He loved routine. Loved structure. Loved his little notes and puzzles and—” Mojave hummed. “Maybe I turn him into a cabinet.”

Rowan stared at him.

Mojave met their gaze, utterly sincere. “What? Waste is a sin.”

Rowan’s breath left them in a slow exhale. Their shoulders slumped, not in surrender, just in that exhausted, hollow way that meant everything in them hurt too much to argue.

“I’m thinking... something fitting.” He tapped a claw against his own jaw thoughtfully. “He sure likes to perform. Likes to welcome people in with tea and a smile and then—” Mojave made a small, dismissive motion with his hand, as if the rest were obvious. “You know. The usual.”

Rowan stared for a beat, expression unreadable.

Then slowly, something in their face shifted. Not softness. Not relief. A bitter, cruel spark of humor that didn’t belong to the old them.

Rowan’s mouth twitched again. “Make him a welcome mat.”

Mojave blinked. “A... what.”

Rowan’s voice stayed deadpan. “A welcome mat. Something really sweet. Something totally not suspicious or serial killer oriented at all, Like... ‘*Come onnn innn!*’” They said with a western accent, arms wide.

...

Mojave just.. stared.

Then something like a tea pot kettle and a choking sound broke out of his throat.

A burst of laughter tore out of him, sharp and sudden. “Oh, *fuck*.” He barked it like it physically hurt. “That’s—” Another laugh. “That’s *vile*..”

Rowan’s laugh finally broke through tcracked and tired. “He loved getting people to walk into his house,” Rowan muttered. “So... let people walk on him forever. Let him be useful for once.”

Mojave shook his head like he was physically trying to shake the laughter off, but it only made it worse. “*A welcome mat*,” he repeated, sounding offended and thrilled at the same time. “You’re sick.”

Rowan’s eyes flicked up. “From you, that’s basically a diploma.”

Mojave let out a louder laugh, shoulders bouncing once. He actually had to put a hand over his mouth, like he was trying to keep it contained.

Rowan watched him, and for the first time in... too long... the sight of Mojave losing control didn’t feel like a threat.

It felt... absurd.

Then, in the most serious tone ever, Rowan spoke again “Put him right under the doorframe,” they added, voice shaking now, “so he can still... *you know*—”

“What,” Mojave demanded, grinning. “Still *what*?”

Rowan’s eyes flicked toward the wagon for half a second, then back. “Still *greet* people.”

Mojave choked on his own laughter, making a strangled sound. “*PFFT*.”

Rowan kept going anyway, because now it was rolling and they couldn’t stop it either. “And —” they dragged a breath in, trying to control their voice and failing, “and you should gift wrap his head.”

Mojave’s laughter cut off so abruptly it was almost alarming. He turned fully toward Rowan, eyes wide. “*Say that again*.”

Rowan’s lips twitched. A real smile this time, small and mean. “Gift wrap it. Big bow. A tag that says ‘*For you* :)’”

Mojave made a sound that was half laugh, half scream, then doubled over like he’d been stabbed. Then he made this ugly, delighted sound like laughter and disbelief collided in his throat, and he doubled slightly at the waist.

Rowan’s eyes narrowed, and the spark became a flame. “Yeah.. Since he *oh* so *looved* giving gifts,”

Mojave wheezed out a laugh so sharp it sounded like it hurt him. “*The battery—*” he choked, “—*the box—*”

Rowan said, dead serious, “A box of *shit*.”

Mojave lost it.

Rowan’s laughter came back harder, and they actually had to grab Mojave’s arm for balance because they were teetering, swaying to hard to the side, antlers casting warped shadows that bounced with every shake of their body.

“Stop—” Rowan wheezed, “—stop, it hurts—”

Mojave leaned into it mercilessly. “Oh, does it? Does it hurt to laugh, *deer*?”

Rowan shoved him weakly, more of a slap than a push, but it made Mojave stumble half a step, and he laughed even harder, stumbling right back into Rowan’s space like a cat knocking into you on purpose.

Rowan slapped his arm again. “I hate you.”

Mojave grinned. “No, you don’t.”

Rowan tried to glare, but it collapsed into another laugh, breathless. “I do.”

Mojave wiped at his eyes with the back of his wrist like he’d genuinely started tearing up from laughing. “Alright,” he said, still chuckling, “A welcome mat outside... head in a gift box... what else?”

Rowan’s eyes flicked up to the night sky like they were thinking deeply about art.

“Put a little card in front of the box. Something you read before opening it,” Rowan said hoarsely. “Something polite. Something that sounds like him.”

Mojave leaned in, delighted. “Go on.”

Rowan faked the most softest, gentlest tone they could manage, mocking sweetness that made even them cringe.

“Oh hello there!” Rowan said, voice trembling with laughter. “Sorry, friend—didn’t hear you come in. *Let me just—*”

Mojave made a sound like he was dying.

Rowan kept going, because now they couldn’t stop. “—*put my glasses on.*”

Mojave slapped Rowan’s shoulder, harder than Rowan meant to shove him, and Rowan nearly toppled sideways, catching himself on the wagon handle with a sharp hiss of pain.

“OW—” Rowan snapped, laughing through it. “Stop hitting me!”

Mojave's grin turned feral. "You started it!"

Rowan laughed again, then winced, then laughed harder at the fact that laughing hurt, like the universe couldn't even let them have this without charging interest. Rowan pressed a hand to their forehead, breathing hard, laughter still bubbling up in smaller aftershocks. "My head—" they muttered. "My head is going to *split*."

Mojave's laugh softened just a fraction, still amused, but quieter. "Then stop laughing."

Rowan looked at him with exhausted disbelief. "You're the one—"

Mojave shrugged, unrepentant. "You're the one who suggested the *welcome mat*."

Rowan stared at the dirt, ready to let the joke die down. Then, very quietly, they said, "Make it say '*Bless this mess*.'"

Mojave's entire face broke again.

He laughed so hard he actually had to bend forward, hands on his knees, wheezing. "PFT—FUCK—" he gasped.

Rowan's laughter returned, helpless and shaking, and for a few bright, impossible seconds, the night didn't feel like a cage.

Just two monsters in the dark, sharing a joke so foul it almost felt like freedom..

Mid laugh, Mojave's ears flicked.

Not at Rowan.

At the wagon.

At the soft, wet shift of weight behind them. The low creak of rope. The faintest... dragging exhale that didn't belong to either of them.

Mojave's grin froze on his face like a mask slipping sideways.

"Oh," he said.

Mojave pointed at the wagon, "I forgot the fucker was still alive."

Rowan went dead still for a beat.

Then their expression twisted into something so dark it shouldn't have been funny. A laugh punched out of them. It came out ragged. Painful. Immediate.

"No—" Rowan choked, "—no you did not—how??"

Mojave made a strangled, delighted sound and doubled over again like somebody had hit him in the gut. "We've been—" he gasped, "—we've been talking about him like he's *already* a **rug**—"

Rowan slapped his arm weakly. “*STOP*. Stop it. Oh my god.”

Mojave straightened just enough to look at Atticus again, and the expression on his face was wicked, pure, gleeful disrespect.

He put on the sweet, gentle tone again, perfectly mocking Atticus’s voice. “Oh hello there!”

Rowan’s laugh turned into a pained gasp. “Mojave—!”

Mojave didn’t even glance at Rowan. He leaned into it, shameless, pitching his voice syrupy like honey left out too long. “I’m sorry friend, I didn’t see you—”

Rowan tried to glare, but it dissolved into another breathless laugh that stabbed their skull. “*Stop*—stop doing his voice—”

Mojave lifted his hand and pantomimed adjusting imaginary glasses, careful and delicate like a saint. “Let me just put *my*—”

"STOP."

glasses on—”

Rowan made a sound between a laugh and a whine and pressed their palm to their forehead, eyes squeezed shut. “You’re evil.”

Mojave turned back to the wagon and waved lazily at the slumped figure like a host acknowledging a guest at dinner. “Anyway! Welcome to the afterparty.”

Rowan’s breath hitched, another laugh. Another wince. “*Shut up.*”

Mojave clicked his tongue, suddenly thoughtful, as if considering etiquette. “Do you think he can hear?”

Rowan blinked at him, still wheezing. “Why are you asking me like I’m the medical professional here?”

Mojave shrugged. “Because you’re the one who—” he gestured vaguely toward Rowan’s head, then toward the wagon, “—did the *thing*.”

Rowan’s laughter faltered for half a second. Their face went flat again, tired, hollow. Then the humor snapped back, brittle as glass. “I don’t know. I don’t care.”

Mojave leaned closer to the wagon, voice dropping into a stage whisper that was somehow louder than normal. “Hey, Atticus.”

Rowan slapped his arm again. “*Mojave—*”

Mojave ignored them completely. “If you can hear me, blink twice.”

There was no response. Just that slack, heavy stillness. The rope creaked as the wagon rolled. The night swallowed everything else.

Rowan stared at the shape for a long second, chest tight.

Then Mojave waved a hand like he was dismissing a boring conversation. "Ahh—pfft," He shrugged. "He's lobotomized. Not like he can hear much."

Rowan's laugh sputtered again, unwilling. "That's not—"

Mojave cut in, still in the fake gentle tone, now directly addressing the wagon like it was a neighbor at a barbecue. "Well, you take care now. We're gonna go make you into a welcome mat. *Oh Bless this mess!*"

Rowan actually wheezed. "STOP—"

Mojave grinned, eyes bright and cruel with amusement. "What? He loved hospitality."

Rowan's head pulsed viciously, and they hissed through their teeth, laughter dying into a shaky exhale. "I swear to god if you make me laugh again my skull is going to split."

And just as Rowan thought the moment might settle,

Mojave leaned toward the wagon one last time and sang in that syrupy voice, "*Twilight tiiiime—*"

Rowan made a strangled sound and shoved him, laughing and cursing at once, clutching their head like it was trying to escape their body.

Mojave stumbled a half-step, caught himself, and laughed right back, loud and unrepentant. Like the desert itself was appalled they'd found something to enjoy in it.

Never did Rowan think they'd find themselves actually laughing alongside Mojave.

Mojave.

Of all things.

And for the first time since the basement,

It made Rowan forget the agonizing pain in their head.

Only slightly.

But enough.

They're bondingggg (人*∀`)

Chapter 18: "Have I Ever Lied To You?"

Chapter Summary

Mojave helps MC

Chapter Notes

I really hope I portrayed Mojave's views on Atticus's actions accurately. From what we've discovered throughout the game, it seems even Mojave has limits and a degree to which certain things unsettle him, so I imagine something disturbing as Inbreeding would've made him frown, given he too, is an animal. And his main hyperfixation is the emotional intimacy in death, trophies, and philosophy of survival. While I think he'd enjoy suffering, I think even Mojave would dislike Atticus's interests.

I also like to think Atticus and Mojave had history, judging by how Mojave went into specific detail about Atticus's behavior that sounds too personal, like as if he too experienced it, and perhaps thought Atticus was his equal at some point, (not completely mutually, cause Mojave is still a narcissist at the end of the day) but thought he probably found someone like minded. But then Atticus probably got too cocky and that caused a power imbalance between them. A permanent rivalry. Owls and Cats hunt similar prey but are cut from the same cloth.

My friend and I played the game thoroughly and found some more notes that not many players that I've watched have discovered before. From what we understood, it seems Mojave was shaped by being forced to survive, which led to narcissism and maybe even confusion that sounds similar to an identity crisis for not understanding the world's cruel ways, so he made himself the center of it for it to make sense, and Atticus was shaped by discovering his confidence and liking it too much. Of course, i'd like to hear other ppl's thoughts too!

If you wanna see the gameplay of us discovering the easter eggs and hidden mssgs, i'll link the video below and mark it as unlisted, so that only YOU guys can watch it privately. There are a few cool hidden details we found :]

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Rowan sighed softly as the laughter finally died down, deciding to let the joke finally diminish as the pulsing became more and more unbearable. "Alright... no more welcome mat jokes," they muttered. "My head feels like it's gonna explode."

They reached up instinctively, then froze halfway, teeth gritting. “Seriously,” Rowan said, voice tight. “How the fuck are we supposed to take this shit off?”

Mojave glanced at the antlers, then back at Rowan.

“*Oh*,” he said lightly. “I’ve got an idea.”

Rowan narrowed their eyes. “I don’t like the way you said that.”

“You won’t,” Mojave agreed pleasantly. They walked a few more steps in silence before Mojave spoke again.

“You know why deer shed their antlers?” he asked.

Rowan let out a humorless laugh. “If this is a metaphor, I swear to god—”

“It is,” Mojave said. “And it’s a good one, so *shut up*.”

Rowan rolled their eyes but didn’t interrupt.

“Deer don’t keep antlers forever,” Mojave continued. “They grow them, they use them, they bleed for them. Then, when they’re done, when they’ve served their purpose.. the body rejects them.”

He tapped his own temple with one claw. “The blood supply cuts off. Bone weakens. Eventually they fall away.” He glanced at sideways. “They don’t rip them off themselves. They let time do the work.”

Rowan swallowed. Their grip on the wagon tightened.

“And me?” they asked quietly.

Mojave smiled, slow and sharp. “You’re not a deer,” he said. “You don’t get the luxury of waiting.”

He stopped walking.

Rowan stopped too.

Mojave turned fully toward them now, eyes catching starlight, expression unreadable but intent. “Those antlers?” he said. “They’re not just decorations. They’re a lesson. A mark. He put them there to claim you.”

Rowan’s jaw clenched.

“I don’t let anyone else leave marks on what’s mine,” Mojave went on calmly. “Including *you*.”

Rowan’s breath hitched, not in fear. Anticipation. Pain, already imagined.

“So,” Mojave added, almost gently, “When we get home. I’ll look at them. See if we can remove them. It won’t be clean. Not easy. But effective.”

Rowan stared at him for a long moment. “...It’s gonna hurt,” they said flatly.

Mojave’s ears flicked. “Like hell.”

...

Then Rowan exhaled, shoulders slumping as exhaustion finally pressed in. “Figures,” they muttered. “Everything else has.” They looked back at the wagon. At the road ahead. At the night that felt different now, less empty. Less lonely.

“...Do it,” Rowan said.

Mojave’s smile deepened, not wide, but Satisfied. Like a craftsman admiring a finished blade. “Good,” he said. “You’re learning.”

And as they started walking again, side by side, Mojave thought absently, dangerously.. that it was rare to see someone become what they were always meant to be.

Rarer still to be there when it happened.

The basement door slammed shut with a dull, final thud.

Dust drifted down from the doors like ash.

Mojave didn’t look back at it.

“Alright,” he said lightly, brushing his hands together. “That’s taken care of.”

Rowan stood in front of the basement doors for a second longer than necessary before going inside the house, chest rising and falling unevenly. The house felt... different now. Quieter. Like something rotten had been removed, even if the smell still lingered in the walls.

“Kitchen,” Mojave added, already walking. “Sit.”

Rowan followed on instinct more than obedience.

The kitchen lights were too bright. Warm. Flickering. It made the blood on Rowan’s hands look black. Mojave nudged a chair out with his foot, and Rowan collapsed into it with a groan, elbows on the table, head hanging.

“Don’t move,” Mojave said.

He stepped behind Rowan, claws deft but not gentle, fingers brushing their ear. Rowan flinched immediately.

“Hey—”

“Relax,” Mojave muttered. “This part’s actually merciful.”

He pinched the metal tag between claw and thumb and twisted. There was a sharp sting. A tug. Then,

Relief.

Rowan sucked in a breath like they'd been underwater and just surfaced. Their shoulders sagged as the pressure vanished, the constant pull finally gone.

"...Fuck," Rowan breathed. "I didn't realize how much that hurt until it stopped."

Mojave held the tag up between two fingers, examining it with mild disgust. "Yeah. Funny how that works." He dropped it into the trash with a metallic clink. "Farm-grade. Cheap. He didn't even splurge."

Rowan huffed weakly. "Figures."

Mojave leaned against the counter, crossing his arms. "You know," he said dryly, "between the ear tag, the cage, the feeding rituals... I'm honestly surprised he didn't try to brand you."

Rowan groaned, dropping their forehead onto the table. "Please don't give him credit retroactively."

"Oh, I'm not," Mojave replied. "I'm insulting his creativity."

Rowan didn't lift their head from the table.

Their voice came out muffled against wood, like the words were too heavy to stand up on their own.

"Y'know," they said, deadpan, "I'm pretty sure he was... inbreeding animals down there."

Silence.

Behind them, Mojave's posture changed so fast it was almost funny, ears snapping forward, shoulders squaring like he'd just heard something personally offensive.

"...*What*," he said, flat.

Rowan finally lifted their head. Their eyes were dull with exhaustion, but there was something sharp in them too, something that hadn't been there a few days ago. They rubbed their thumb along the edge of the table like they were trying to wipe the memory off their skin.

"In the cages," Rowan said. "Not just... deer. Not just goats. Not just rabbits." A swallow. "There were ones that weren't right."

Mojave's gaze narrowed. "Define '*not right*.'"

Rowan's jaw tensed. "Hybrid-looking. Like... someone tried to stitch nature together with a bad idea and too much time." Their eyes flicked away, then back. "Some were too small.

Some looked... undergrown. Like their bodies didn't know what they were supposed to be."

They let out a slow breath through their nose, bitter. "I saw one that looked like it was built wrong on purpose," Rowan added. "Like suffering was part of the design."

Mojave didn't respond immediately.

He just stared at Rowan, and for once there wasn't that usual amused cruelty in his face. It was something colder. Something... almost offended.

"That," Mojave said finally, voice low, "is... disgusting."

Rowan's mouth twitched, half disbelief, half a humorless laugh. "Oh, *now* you have standards."

Mojave's eyes snapped to them. "Don't do that."

Rowan raised their brows. "Do what?"

"Try to make it cute," Mojave said sharply. "Try to make it a joke. You know exactly what I mean."

Rowan's gaze dropped to their hands. They were clean now, technically. But Rowan still stared at their fingers like the blood was baked into the bone.

"I'm not making it cute," Rowan muttered. "I'm saying it out loud because it won't stop replaying. The cages. The way some of them looked at me. Not like they wanted help—their throat worked, —like they didn't even know what help was anymore."

Mojave's tail lashed once, irritated at Atticus, at the concept, at the sheer waste of it. "I'm not surprised," he said, almost reluctantly.

Rowan's eyes snapped up. "You're not?"

Mojave leaned back against the counter, arms folded, jaw tight. "I used to eat with him." He said it like it tasted bad. "He liked to talk."

Rowan stared. "Talk about what."

Mojave's ears angled back. "Control. Improvement. 'Purpose.'" He made the words sound like profanity. "He always needed something to manage. Something to 'fix.' Something to reduce into categories."

Rowan swallowed. "Stock."

Mojave's eyes flicked to Rowan's antlers. Then away. His voice went quieter. Meaner.

"Exactly."

Rowan's face tightened. "So you knew he was like this."

Mojave's gaze slid back to Rowan, sharp as a blade. "I told you Atticus was depraved," he continued. "I didn't meet him once and decide that for fun."

Rowan's laugh came out brittle. "Congratulations. You've been out-weirded."

Mojave's lip curled. "Don't flatter him."

Rowan scoffed. "I'm not. I'm—" they hesitated, then said it anyway, raw and resentful, "—I'm trying to understand why he needed me to feel like an animal."

Mojave's eyes narrowed with a strange intensity. "Because killing isn't enough for him."

Rowan went still.

Mojave continued, voice even. "Killing is an ending. It's quick. It's clean." His eyes glinted. "What he likes is ownership. The long part. The part where you stop being you."

Rowan's throat tightened.

"And you?" Rowan asked, voice low. "You like trophies. Taxidermy. 'Art.' What makes you any better?"

Mojave stared at them for a long second, then gave a short, humorless huff.

"I never pretended I was better," he said. "I'm not a saint. I'm not human. I don't do your little guilt dances." His gaze flicked over Rowan, assessing. "But even I know the difference between taking something... and manufacturing something just to watch it fail."

Rowan's eyes narrowed. "So it's about waste."

Mojave's ears flicked. "Waste is a sin," he said simply, like it was a law of physics. "Breeding suffering into something and calling it a project? That's not hunger. That's vanity."

Rowan stared at him, unsettled all over again by the fact that Mojave could say something like that and mean it.

"So you hate him," Rowan said.

Mojave's smile was small, sharp, satisfied. "I hate what he thinks he is. I hate his confidence. I hate his facade. I knew he was a liar." A pause. "I knew he liked wearing kindness like a costume. People like him don't just wake up one day wanting to harvest strangers. That takes years of practice. Refinement." Another pause, more honest. "I didn't know he'd built a whole... farm."

There was a beat.

Then Mojave's tone shifted. More cold.

"And that's why I *told* you," he said, tapping the table once for emphasis, "to *shoot* him.. on *sight*."

Rowan winced. "I know."

Mojave's ears twitched. "No. You listened. You just didn't believe me."

Rowan dragged a hand down their face. "It's hard to trust the guy who's been terrorizing you since day one."

Mojave tilted his head. "Terrorizing..?"

Rowan glanced up at him, eyes tired but burning. "You drown someone once, they get a little hesitant about your advice."

...

Mojave scoffed, then shrugged. "It was supposed to be baptism.. the drowning part was just accidental.."

Despite everything, Rowan let out a short, exhausted laugh.

Mojave moved closer again, this time lifting Rowan's chin with two fingers. "*Still*," he said quietly, "you don't get to make that mistake twice. And if you ever hand your weapon to a smiling stranger again," Mojave added, bringing his face close to Rowan's, his voice dropping a low menacing growl,

"I'll make sure the next 'present' you open is your own *teeth*."

Rowan met his gaze, tensing up silently. But they didn't argue. They knew better by now.

Mojave's ears flicked, pleased with the silent submission.

"Now," Mojave went on, shifting focus, "let's look at the real problem." He leaned in, parting Rowan's blood-matted hair with careful precision.

Rowan hissed. "Careful—"

"Oh, I am," Mojave replied. "This is... worse than I thought."

He studied the stitching, eyes narrowing. "He didn't just sew them in. He drilled. Wedged the bone directly into the scalp. Anchored it deep." A pause. "Sloppy, though. Too much tension on the sutures."

Rowan swallowed hard. "Is that bad?"

"It means he was in a hurry," Mojave said. "Or.. enjoying himself too much to be precise. Hes perverted that way."

Rowan's jaw tightened.

Mojave straightened, washing his hands at the sink like this was any other evening chore. "Good news," he added casually. "They're not permanent."

Rowan exhaled shakily. “Bad news?”

Mojave turned off the faucet and looked at them with a thin, knowing smile.

“Removing them is going to hurt like *hell*.”

Rowan closed their eyes, nodding once. “Figures.”

Mojave reached for a clean cloth, tossing it to Rowan. “You did good today,” he said, almost like a parent praising a child’s artwork. “Messy. Inelegant. But honest.”

Rowan wiped their hands slowly. “I didn’t feel bad.”

Mojave’s smile sharpened. “I noticed.”

The kitchen hummed softly around them, fluorescent light flickering but in a way that felt domestic rather than unsettling, the quiet intimacy of shared violence.

Predator to predator.

“Get some food in you,” Mojave added, sliding a bowl across the table. “You’re no good to me unconscious.”

Rowan took it, hands steady despite everything.

“...Thanks,” they muttered.

Mojave tilted his head. “Don’t thank me.” Then, softer, “Just don’t waste what he made you.”

Rowan didn’t even ask what it was this time.

They took the bowl Mojave set in front of them and dug in.

Venison. Familiar texture. Familiar iron tang. The kind that sat heavy but grounding. Halfway through the first few bites, their throat tightened anyway, not from disgust, not from hesitation, but from memory. Jane’s face flashed. John’s hands. The way John Jr. had screamed.

Rowan gagged once, sharp and sudden.

But they didn’t stop.

They swallowed it back down, jaw working, shoulders tense. No shaking hands. No tears. No retching into the sink like before. They just kept eating, methodical, eyes unfocused.

Mojave watched from the counter, tail stump flicking once.

“...Huh,” he murmured.

Rowan scraped the bowl clean and set it down harder than necessary, breathing a little too fast. “Don’t,” they muttered. “Don’t fucking say it.”

Mojave smirked. “Wasn’t going to.”

Rowan wiped their mouth with the back of their sleeve, then winced as their antlers throbbed. “Okay,” they said hoarsely. “So... How are we doing this.”

Mojave went quiet.

Too quiet.

He leaned back against the counter, arms folding, gaze drifting up to Rowan’s head again. He stared for a long moment, contemplative. Almost indulgent.

“I’ll be honest,” he said finally. “A part of me really wants to *just*—” he made a sharp pulling motion with his hand, fingers curling like hooks, “—*yank* them straight out.”

Rowan’s eyes widened. “Absolutely the *fuck not*.”

Mojave’s ears twitched. “Rip it like a bandaid. One good pull. Hear the *crunch*.” His mouth curved. “Very cathartic.”

“No,” Rowan snapped immediately. “Nope. No. We are *not* doing that.”

“It would be fast,” Mojave reasoned. “Painful, *sure*, but—”

“No.”

“—short lived—”

“No!”

“—and very—”

Rowan stood up so fast the chair screeched. “If you *touch* my antlers I will stab you with your own fucking knife.”

Mojave blinked.

Then grinned.

“Oh?” he *purred*, stepping closer. “That’s new.”

Rowan backed up instantly, hand flying to their head protectively. “Don’t. Don’t you dare.”

Mojave took another step.

Rowan retreated around the kitchen table like prey that knew the game too well now. “I’m serious, Mojave.”

“I believe you,” he said, advancing anyway around the table, clearly enjoying this chase far too much. “I just don’t respect it.”

Rowan quickly went around the table.

"Mojave.. I swear to fucking God.."

Mojave paused.

and just stared.

Then—

He *leaped* over the table.

"DON'T *FUCKING*—" Rowan yelped and scrambled sideways, table legs thudding as they kept distance. "I SWEAR TO GOD—"

Mojave laughed then. Actually laughed. A low, breathy sound he clearly tried and failed to suppress. "You survived Atticus," he teased. "But *this* is what scares you?"

"Yes!" Rowan barked. "Because that asshole didn't live with me afterward!"

Mojave paused, hand mid-air.

"...Fair."

He lowered it, still smirking. "Relax. I'm not pulling them out."

Rowan eyed him suspiciously. "You swear?"

Mojave tilted his head. "I swear I won't do it without warning." He glanced at Rowan's antlers one more time, expression shifting, less playful now. Calculating.

"Plus, You've survived worse."

"Doesn't mean I'm lining up for it," Rowan snapped, then winced as the antlers throbbed in protest. They set the food down, breathing through their nose. "If you touch them like that, I will actually kill you. On principle."

Mojave's mouth twitched. Amused.

"See?" he said lightly. "That fire's new."

Rowan shot him a look. "I am not in the mood."

"*Mm*," Mojave hummed. "You'll get used to that too."

He pushed off the doorframe and stepped closer, peering at the stitching again. This time his tone shifted, less teasing, more... practical.

"They're anchored," he said. "Wedged in. If I pull, you'll black out. Maybe worse. I won't risk scrambling what little's still working in there."

Rowan blinked. “Wow. That’s... *considerate*. I think..”

“Don’t get used to it.”

Mojave reached for a clean cloth, dampened it again, and gently pressed it near the base of one antler, not enough to hurt, just enough to feel.

Rowan hissed through their teeth anyway.

“Relax,” Mojave said. “I’m looking.”

Rowan scoffed weakly. “You look like you’re appraising a deer rack.”

Mojave smiled without humor. “Occupational habit.”

He straightened after a moment, thoughtful. “Antlers shed for a reason,” he said. “Blood flow changes. Bone weakens. They fall off when the body’s ready.”

Rowan frowned. “And you’re saying...?”

“I’m saying,” Mojave continued, “we don’t rush it. We let your body decide when it’s done carrying them. Plus, I still need you aware for the next hunt. You’re gonna need lots of rest when these things are out.”

Rowan’s jaw tightened. “So I just... live like this?”

“For a bit,” Mojave replied. “We manage the pain. Keep you fed. Keep infection out. When they loose, when they’re ready to come off, I’ll help.”

Rowan stared down at their hands, still faintly trembling.

“...And if I can’t wait?”

Mojave met their eyes. His pupils narrowed slightly. “Then we do it the ugly way,” he said. “Together.”

...

Rowan picked up the venison again and took another bite.

“...Fine,” they muttered. “But if you even think about yanking them before then—”

Mojave chuckled softly. “You’ll try to kill me.”

Rowan didn’t look up. “I won’t *try*.”

Mojave’s grin widened.

That, more than anything, told him they were already changing. And he fucking loved it.

Rowan chewed slowly, mechanically, jaw aching more from exhaustion than effort. The room felt too warm, the light too bright, the smell of iron clinging to everything. Their hands had stopped shaking, which almost scared them more.

The quiet stretched.

Too long.

Rowan's gaze drifted somewhere past Mojave's shoulder, unfocused, and then it snagged on a memory they hadn't meant to touch.

Atticus's voice.

Soft. Measured. Kind in the way that felt practiced.

Rowan swallowed hard now, throat tightening. They stared down into the empty bowl, seeing something else entirely.

They remembered how easy it had been to talk to him. How Atticus had listened to them, arms crossed loosely, nodding along like he actually gave a shit.

I hate to break it to you, he had said, but... I don't think Mojave... even owns a car battery.

Rowan's fingers curled against the table now.

Back then, they'd frowned. No... but..

Yeah... I've been to his place before. I mean, a few times. I've seen most of what he keeps. Never seen a car battery. Not once.

That had landed harder than Rowan wanted to admit.

Atticus had smiled then. Not sharp. Not cruel. Just... knowing.

That's not the kind of thing Mojave collects. You know... think about it.

Rowan's jaw tightened in the present.

They knew.. knew Atticus was a lying, conniving, manipulative bastard. A man who'd drilled antlers into their skull and smiled while doing it. A man who'd broken them down piece by piece for sport.

But.

God damn it.

Not everything he said had been wrong.

Rowan pushed the bowl away slowly and looked up.

Mojave was watching them already.

“Hey,” Rowan said quietly. “I need to ask you something.”

Mojave’s ears twitched once. “That tone never means anything good.”

Rowan exhaled through their nose. “Just—be straight with me. For once.”

Mojave’s smile thinned. “I’m always straight with you.”

Rowan held his gaze. “Do you actually own a car battery?”

The air shifted.

Not violently. Not loudly.

But it coiled.

Mojave straightened, his expression sharpening in a way similar to the moment he had decided to drown them. The amusement drained from his face like someone had flipped a switch.

“...What.”

Rowan swallowed. “Atticus told me—”

Mojave moved.

Fast.

He was suddenly too close, the edge of his shadow swallowing Rowan whole. One hand slammed onto the table beside them, not touching, not yet, but close enough that Rowan flinched on instinct.

“Say his name again,” Mojave said softly, “and we’re going to have a *different* conversation.”

Rowan’s heart kicked hard against their ribs, but they didn’t look away. “He said you don’t have one. That you never did. That you just—” they hesitated, then forced it out, “—like giving people false hope.”

Mojave leaned down, face inches from theirs now, eyes burning.

“Have I ever lied to you,” he asked, voice low and dangerous, “*once?*”

Rowan’s mouth opened,

Then stopped.

“...You told me we were hunting ‘*just deer,*’” they said carefully.

Mojave’s lip curled. “We were.”

“They talked,” Rowan snapped. “They had a house. A family.”

“And they were deer,” Mojave shot back instantly. “On two legs. With opinions. I never said otherwise.”

Rowan stared at him. “That’s—”

“Not lying,” Mojave cut in. “That’s *omission*. Learn the difference.”

Silence slammed down between them.

Rowan’s chest rose and fell a little faster. “...Other than that,” they said reluctantly, “no... You haven’t lied.”

Mojave didn’t pull back.

“Then why...” he murmured, “are you choosing to believe him over *me*?”

Rowan clenched their jaw. “Because he said something that made sense.”

Mojave’s eyes narrowed. “He tortured you.”

“I know.”

“He drilled into your skull.”

“I know!”

“And you’re still letting his words crawl around in your head,” Mojave hissed. “Still letting him doubt me for you.”

Rowan’s voice dropped. “I just don’t want to keep doing this for nothing.”

That stopped him.

Mojave stilled, studying Rowan’s face, not like prey now, not like a toy, but like something fractured he was deciding whether to keep or crush.

Rowan’s words hung there, thin and exposed.

I just don’t want to keep doing this for nothing.

Mojave didn’t move.

Not a twitch of his ears. Not the flick of his tail. He just stood there, shoulders squared, staring at Rowan like he was recalculating something he thought he already understood.

For the first time since Rowan had met him, the silence wasn’t deliberate.

It was... stunned.

Then Mojave let out a sound, soft, breathy, almost a laugh. Almost.

“*Huh*,” he murmured.

He dragged a hand down his face and turned away, rolling his shoulder blades back like he was working tension out of old scars. When he spoke again, his voice was lighter, but wrong. Brittle. Bitter around the edges.

“So it’s *still* all about that battery, huh?”

Rowan’s stomach dropped.

“That’s not—” they started, then faltered. Their head throbbed, antlers pulsing dully with their heartbeat. “I just meant—”

Mojave waved a hand without looking at them. “No, no. I hear you.” Another quiet chuckle slipped out, humorless. “You’ve been doing all this,” he said, gesturing vaguely toward the blood, the trophies, to the basement where Atticus’s lobotomized state resided, “because you’re waiting to get *paid*.”

He finally turned back.

His eyes were sharp now. His expression shifted, to something that maybe could be 'hurt,' but buried under something colder.

“Guess that makes sense,” he went on. “Why else would you gut people so clean? *Eat* without flinching? *Swing* an axe like you were born holding it.” His mouth curved, but there was no warmth in it. “All just business, *right*?”

Rowan swallowed. “That’s not what I said.”

“But it’s what you meant,” Mojave replied calmly. Too calmly. “You didn’t say you don’t want to do this anymore. You didn’t say you’re scared.” His gaze dragged slowly over Rowan, blood-smeared, changed... evolved. “You said you don’t want it to be for nothing.”

...

“That tells me everything.”

Rowan’s chest tightened. “Mojave—”

“You’ll see it,” Mojave interrupted, already turning away again. “When you’ve learned to stop questioning me.”

He moved past Rowan then, close enough that Rowan could feel the heat off him, smell the faint iron and smoke that never seemed to leave his clothes. He didn’t touch them, but it felt like he might, and that almost made it worse.

“You think I don’t notice?” he said quietly, from just behind Rowan’s shoulder. “The way you don’t hesitate anymore. The way your hands don’t shake. The way you looked at Atticus while you drilled a bit into his frontal lobe?”

Rowan flinched.

Mojave leaned closer, voice dropping. “That wasn’t someone killing for a reward.”

He straightened, stepping back before Rowan could react. The distance felt abrupt. Intentional.

“You’re still telling yourself this is temporary,” Mojave said, more to the room than to them. “That there’s an end point. A transaction. Something neat and simple waiting at the end so you don’t have to think about what you’ve already become.”

He glanced at Rowan again, eyes unreadable. “That’s cute.”

Rowan’s hands curled into fists. “You don’t get to decide why I—”

“No,” Mojave agreed softly. “I don’t.”

Another pause. Longer this time.

“But don’t insult me by pretending this is all you are.”

He turned and started toward the hall, then stopped at the doorway.

“For what it’s worth,” he added, without looking back, “if it really were just about the battery... you’d have ran already.”

The light hummed. The kitchen felt colder.

Mojave disappeared down the hall, leaving Rowan alone with the echo of his words and the unsettling realization that the thing he seemed most disappointed about wasn’t doubt.

It was that Rowan still hadn’t admitted how much of this they wanted.

Chapter End Notes

<https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0xrDuHoQsaXx0jMttRIKcAbexUqB0-qh&si=MDaO-QiR317E9O1f>

Chapter 19: Mourning Purity

Chapter Summary

MC goes for a walk and discovers something odd in Mojave's yard

Chapter Notes

Yall, I wrote half of this during a first date with someone cause I knew I couldn't let yall starve. You best know bro was side eyeing me the entire time but I was locked in. My readers come first.

It ain't too big but its short enough to satisfy. (The chapter, I mean) LMAO, so come get your slop.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Rowan sat there in silence for a while.

They didn't argue with Mojave in that moment.

They couldn't.

Because the truth was, Mojave was right in the most infuriating way possible. If it had only been about the battery, Rowan would've been gone the first night. Stolen food, stolen whatever parts they could carry, and vanished into the desert like a rumor.

Instead, they were still here. With antlers burning in their skull and someone else's blood drying on their clothes, listening to Mojave talk like he owned the language in their head. Rowan pushed back from the table so hard the chair legs screeched. The sound snapped through the kitchen like a warning.

They walked out.

Not storming, because storms still sounded like panic, and Rowan refused to give him that. Just... leaving. Quietly. Like a ghost that decided it didn't want to haunt the same room anymore.

The door creaked when they opened it. Cold desert air spilled in and hit Rowan's face like a slap, dry and sharp, yet almost cleansing. Almost. The night wrapped around them immediately, vast and indifferent, stars pinned overhead like nails.

Rowan stepped outside and let the door swing shut behind them. For a few seconds, they just stood there and breathed. And tried not to feel how the antlers shifted slightly with every inhale. Tried not to think about how Mojave had talked to them tonight, not like prey, not like a project, but like something that had finally... clicked into place.

Rowan started walking.

Mojave's yard wasn't a yard. It was a graveyard for things that used to be useful, piles of warped metal, gutted appliances, rusted barrels, broken fence posts that leaned like tired bones. Weeds threaded between everything, stubborn and sharp, pushing up through gravel like the earth was trying to reclaim the mess one thorn at a time.

Rowan moved through it slowly, boots crunching, antler shadows dragging faintly behind them like a reminder of their innocence lost.

The junk was familiar. Almost comforting in its ugliness. It didn't pretend to be anything else.

That thought made Rowan's throat tighten.

That's what he keeps saying about himself.

No facade. No costume. No kindness.

And yet... Mojave hated Atticus's facade like it was a personal insult. Like lying about being gentle was worse than being monstrous openly.

Rowan didn't understand it.

They didn't understand him.

Why Mojave wanted Rowan to become like him so *badly*.

And why it made him tense, ACTUALLY tense whenever Rowan *didn't*.

Like it wasn't about control for its own sake. Like it was... disappointment. Betrayal. A personal offense.

Rowan scuffed their boot over a patch of dirt, mind circling the same question again and again until it felt like chewing glass.

Why do you care?

They walked past a barrel filled with something dark and wet-smelling and refused to look inside. Past a heap of antlers, real ones, old ones, stacked beside a tire like someone had started a shrine and got bored halfway through.

Their own antlers throbbed in sympathy, and Rowan hissed softly, breath frosting faintly in the cold.

“God,” they muttered, and didn’t even know who they were talking to. God? Mojave? The desert? The part of themselves that still tried to make meaning out of suffering?

They rounded the side of the house.

And stopped.

Because there was a small mound of dirt there. Too neat. Too intentional. A crude wooden cross had been planted into it, the wood pale and weathered like it had been cut from whatever was closest and hammered down with impatience.

Rowan stared at it for a long moment, not moving, not breathing right.

Then they stepped closer and read it.

You were too pure for this world.

Rest eternally.

They stood there, staring at the words until they blurred. The message was... wrong.

Not because it was sentimental. Mojave could be theatrical. Mojave could be dramatic. Mojave could carve poetry into a person if he felt like it.

But “*pure*”?

Rowan swallowed.

They looked at the mound again. The size. The placement. The way it was tucked behind the house like someone had hidden it from the world, like it was private.

Rowan crouched slowly, careful not to jolt their head, and stared at the dirt.

“What the hell is this,” Rowan whispered. They didn’t touch it. They didn’t dig. They just... hovered, like the ground might bite if they acknowledged it too directly.

Is that... your *tail*?

The thought came uninvited, immediate and sick.

Mojave had said it so casually earlier.. *I ate my own tail. Bit it clean off.* Like it was a practical anecdote. Like it was a weather report.

And now there was a grave with a cross.

Rowan’s throat tightened again.

Because if Mojave had *truly* eaten it, if he'd *truly* destroyed it, what was left to bury?

Unless...

Unless he hadn't eaten all of it.

Unless some part of it had still been there. Some part he couldn't swallow. Some part he'd cut away and put in the ground because he couldn't stand to look at it anymore.

Or worse,

Unless it wasn't his tail at all.

Rowan's eyes flicked over the yard again, suddenly more aware of everything. The trophies, the bodies, the careful displays of violence that were almost... curated.

Mojave collected. Mojave kept.

Rowan stared back at the little grave.

"You were too pure..." Rowan murmured again, like testing the words, like they might reveal something if repeated.

Pure.

Who does Mojave call *pure*?

Who does Mojave *mourn*?

Rowan sat back on their heels, shaking their head slowly.

This was the part that didn't fit.

Mojave didn't do grief like humans did. He didn't cry. He didn't beg. He didn't tremble. His pain didn't leak out.

It hardened.

It turned into rules. Into rituals. Into superiority. Narcissism.

Rowan stared at the grave and felt something unsteady in their chest, not pity, not sympathy. Something stranger. Curiosity with teeth.

Did you ever feel anything besides hunger and pride? Rowan wondered. *Or did you get hurt so badly that you decided feelings were just another weakness to amputate?*

Victim complex turned god complex.

Rowan could almost see it, a creature that got humiliated, helpless, small once, then vowed it would never happen again and built an entire religion out of not being touched.

Out of being untouchable.

Out of being the one who decides what people become.

The thought almost reminded them of...

...

The pale moonlight casted a shadow over the grave, Rowans shadow, Rowans antlers, stretching across the makeshift grave. The sight made their head pulse again. Made them remember how they vowed to never let anyone touch them like that again.

Rowan's fingers curled into the dirt beside their knee, not digging the grave, just gripping the ground like they needed something solid.

Mojave's voice replayed in their head from the kitchen.

"If it really were just about the battery... you'd have ran already."

Rowan swallowed.

They looked at the little grave again. And for the first time tonight, something in Rowan's anger shifted direction.

Not away from Mojave, but... deeper into him. Past the obvious cruelty, past the jokes, past the philosophy he wore like armor.

Because this grave was a crack.

A tiny, stupid, wooden-cross crack in the monster's mask.

Rowan's jaw clenched hard.

"..Why do you do this," Rowan whispered into the desert. "Why do you keep trying to drag me into your shape. Why does it *matter* to you." They stood, slowly. Their knees popped. Their head throbbed in protest.

Rowan stared at the grave one last time.

Then turned away Into the abyss of the desert.

If Mojave can bury something and call it pure...

If Mojave can write rest eternally like a prayer...

Then somewhere inside him, buried deeper than the grave, there's something he killed on purpose.

And Rowan didn't know if that made him more terrifying...

...or just more human than he wanted anyone to realize.

Rowan didn't go back right away.

They told themselves it was tactical. Smart. Distance buys clarity. But really, if they were honest, it was avoidance with its teeth bared.

They walked until Mojave's house was just another dark shape behind them, swallowed by the dunes and scrub and the kind of silence that made your thoughts sound louder than your footsteps. The desert at night didn't feel peaceful. It felt... patient. Like it had all the time in the world to watch you unravel.

The antlers made moving a constant negotiation. Every step sent a dull, hateful pulse through their skull, and every time the wind caught the points just right, it tugged, subtle but insistent, like the world itself wanted to remind them what they'd been turned into.

Rowan kept walking anyway. They tried to imagine the alternate version of this night.

The one where they didn't turn around. The one where they took the road and just.. ran. No more trophies. No more sermons. No more being studied like a specimen. No more *Mojave*.

It should've been simple.

It should've been the easiest decision of their life.

And yet, every time they pictured it, truly pictured it, the image broke apart at the edges. Because running meant leaving with unfinished things stitched into them.

Not just the antlers.

Not just the blood.

But the shape Mojave had carved into their instincts. The reflex to look over their shoulder. The way silence now felt like a trap. The way kindness made their stomach clench.

And, worse than all of that,

Running meant admitting Mojave had been right about one thing,

That Rowan always came back.

They hated that.

They hated that so much it made them walk faster.

Time smeared. Minutes became an hour. Then two. Their legs ached. Their throat tasted like copper and stale rage. At some point they stopped pretending they were deciding anything and just... drifted in a wide loop back toward the house like a moth trying to pretend it wasn't attracted to the flame.

When the house finally came back into view, Rowan stopped at the edge of the yard and stared.

The place looked the same as it always did, junkyard bones, barrels, rusted metal, the outline of the house sitting there like a tumor that had learned how to wear walls.

Rowan exhaled. "...Fine," they muttered. Not surrender. Not forgiveness. Just... inevitability.

They stepped inside.

And immediately heard it.

Rave music.

Again.

Just the kitchen.

Rowan's whole face pinched like their soul had stepped on a LEGO.

"Oh, for *fuck's* sake," they sighed, closing the door shut behind them. "He better not be dancing in the kitchen again..."

They walked in, bracing themselves for the spectacle.

Rainbow strobe lights were firing across the kitchen walls frantically, almost comical, splattering neon across counters and cabinets like the room had caught a seizure. The music was loud enough to vibrate the silverware.

But Mojave wasn't there.

Rowan paused in the doorway, brow lifting slowly.

The kitchen was empty. The dining room was empty. Only the lights kept going. Like the house itself had been left mid-tantrum.

Rowan followed the sound of nothing, that quiet that wasn't quiet, and found it in the living room.

Mojave was in the chair.

Not lounging. Not watching filthy low quality organisms pulse on the TV. Not butchering meat.

Sitting.

His elbows braced on his knees, face buried in his hands like he was trying to squeeze his thoughts back into his skull. A beer bottle sat on the table, tipped on its side like he'd dropped it and forgot to care. The TV played static, soft hiss like a blizzard trapped behind glass, the screen red like a bloody dark abyss falling into a whirlpool of darkness.

And there, on the long couch like an obscene decorative pillow,

Hieronymus's head.

Just... resting there.

Casual.

Domestic in the most wrong way.

Rowan's stomach turned, not from the gore, they were long past that, but from the normality of it. Like a man leaving his keys on the counter. Like this was just what you did at the end of your evening.

Rowan stood in the doorway for a moment, caught off-guard by the shape of Mojave like this. Guard down. Folded inward. Still.

They didn't like it.

It made him feel real.

And Rowan didn't want him real. Rowan wanted him simple.

A monster you could hate cleanly.

Not... whatever this was.

Mojave didn't look up right away.

He just sat there as the kitchen lights strobed faintly through the hall. The static on the TV filled the silence between beats of music like a pulse, like a party going on in an empty room next door.

Then his ears twitched.

And he sat up, quick, controlled, like he'd been caught doing something embarrassing. His hands dropped to his lap. His posture rearranged itself into something sharper.

He looked at Rowan like he'd been waiting.

"...Ah," Mojave said, voice smooth again, like the last few minutes had never happened. "You're back."

Rowan didn't move.

"For a minute there," Mojave continued, almost teasing, "I thought you really decided to run this time."

Rowan snorted, stepping farther into the room. "Is that why you're drinking instead of raving in the kitchen?"

Mojave's mouth twitched. "No." He said, like as if the idea of Rowan's absence could deter him was laughable.

Rowan's eyes narrowed. And they stayed quiet. Rowan could've pushed. The scene was too strange not to poke at. The beer. The hands in his face. The vibe. The.. grave.

But Rowan's head throbbed, their nerves were already rubbed raw, and they'd spent enough of tonight stepping on landmines.

So they didn't.

They leaned against the wall instead, arms folded, eyes tired and glossed over.

Mojave watched them for a fraction of a second.

Then he looked away.

He took a breath like he was about to recite scripture. And then, because of course he does,

"Do you know the odds of being born?" Mojave asked, staring at the red TV static like it had answers. "One in ten to the power of two million."

Rowan didn't respond.

Mojave continued anyway, because silence was consent in his religion. "That's two million zeroes," he said softly, almost admiring. "Winning the lottery every day for a million years would be more likely. But people love that number. They love it the way they love astrology and blood types and little personality quizzes. Probability..."

He huffed a laugh through his nose. "...Probability is just meaningless ego math. Comfort food for anxious minds. Something to chew on so they don't have to swallow the real truth."

Rowan's throat tightened. They didn't like where this was going.

Mojave's eyes stayed on the static. "Our very existence defies probability," he murmured. "So what does that mean? It means probability is a cute story humans tell themselves so they can pretend their lives are rare and precious."

His ears flicked. "In the end," he said, voice lowering, "it's a coin flip. Fifty-fifty. Yes or no. It is, or it isn't."

He finally looked at Rowan then, gaze sharp as a blade. "...Makes you wonder," Mojave said, almost lightly, "how the hell you ended up here...?"

Rowan's jaw clenched.

Mojave leaned back in his chair, arms draping, pretending he wasn't watching Rowan's face like a scientist watching a reaction.

Then he asked it, smooth and casual, like he was asking about the weather. "So tell me," Mojave said. "How do you feel about what you've accomplished so far?"

Rowan's mouth opened, then closed.

Their tongue felt too heavy.

They swallowed and forced it out anyway. “It’s *evil*,” Rowan said hoarsely. “*All* of it. It’s all evil.”

Mojave went still.

Not theatrical still.

Just... quiet.

Like something inside him had listened.

A long beat passed with only the TV static and the distant rave music from the kitchen, still blasting like the house was trying to drown out its own thoughts.

Then Mojave spoke again, softer.

“...You know” he said, gaze drifting away from Rowan like he was addressing the room itself. “With some rodents.. if resources are scarce, if a child is weak, or even if a mother is just stressed—she’ll eat her own babies alive.”

Rowan’s stomach lurched.

Mojave’s voice didn’t change. No disgust. No sorrow. Just fact. “The uncomfortable truth is,” he continued, “evil looks a lot more boring than people like to admit.”

He tapped one claw lightly against the arm of the chair.

“It’s not the masked killer on television. It’s not the dramatic music. It’s not the big speech before the knife comes down.” Mojave’s eyes flicked to Hieronymus’s head like it was a prop in his lecture. “It’s your neighbor. It’s the person who delivers your mail. It’s the bus driver who takes your kids to school.”

His gaze slid back to Rowan.

“Don’t you get it?” Mojave asked, voice almost gentle. “People want evil to look like a monster because then they get to believe it’s rare. They get to believe it has fangs you can see.”

He leaned forward slightly.

“But evil is lazy,” Mojave murmured. “Evil is routine. Evil is appetite. Evil is someone waking up and choosing the path of least resistance because it feeds them. Because it keeps them safe. Because it gives them control.”

Rowan’s fingers curled at their sides.

Mojave tilted his head.

“It’s just nature,” he said. “And nature doesn’t care about your words for it. Predation doesn’t need your permission. Hunger doesn’t ask if it’s moral.”

He let the silence hang for a second.

Then he smiled.

“And the best part?” Mojave said quietly. “Most people who do awful things still think they’re good. They put ribbons on it. They call it necessity. They call it protection. They call it love.”

His eyes narrowed. “Atticus called it *care*.”

Rowan flinched at the name. Their antlers pulsed like a bruise remembering.

Mojave watched that flinch and seemed pleased by it in the most sickening way, like he’d found the exact nerve to press.

“You called it evil,” Mojave continued, voice smooth again. “That’s cute. That’s human. That’s you trying to keep the world neatly sorted into monsters and victims so you can still find your place in it.”

He spread his hands slightly, almost mock-innocent. “But you’ve already seen what happens when you trust the ‘good’ ones,” Mojave murmured. “*Haven’t* you?”

Rowan stared at him, breathing shallow.

Mojave’s smile didn’t widen.

It sharpened.

“So,” he said again, quieter now, “tell me, Rowan...”

His eyes flicked up briefly to the antlers.

Then back down to Rowan’s face.

“...Do you still think evil is something you are?”

...

“Or something you do?”

The TV hissed.

The kitchen lights strobed.

Hieronymus’s head stared at the ceiling like it was awaiting judgment.

And Rowan stood there, feeling the question land like hook, line, and sinker, because no matter what answer they gave, Mojave would find a way to make it sound like proof.

They just stared past Mojave like the question had hit some internal wall and shattered instead of landing. Their mind felt packed with noise, blood, static, sermons, drills, and trying to sort evil as a thing you are versus evil as a thing you do felt like being asked to solve philosophy while your skull was still screaming.

So they said nothing.

Mojave watched them for a beat longer. Then, apparently bored of waiting for insight, he moved on.

“Well,” he said lightly, pushing himself up from the chair and rolling his shoulders like the conversation had reached its natural end, “speaking of nature.. your next hunt begins.”

Rowan’s head snapped up.

“...*Excuse* me?” The word came out sharp, incredulous. They laughed once, short and ugly. “You cannot be serious.”

Mojave was already walking toward the hall, casual as ever.

Rowan followed him a step, then stopped, anger finally punching through the fog. “After Atticus?” they demanded. “After what he did to me..? Which was, in case you’ve lost track, a *few hours* ago?” They gestured sharply at their head, immediately regretting it as pain flared hot and nauseating. The antlers throbbed in time with their heartbeat, rooted deep and annoying, like something alive was knocking from the inside.

“I can barely stand,” Rowan went on, voice shaking now, not with fear but with disbelief. “My skull feels like it’s splitting open. And you’re telling me to go back out there like *this*?”

Mojave stopped.

He turned slowly, expression unreadable for a moment. Then, almost thoughtfully, he nodded.

“I actually *considered* letting you rest,” he said. “Believe it or not.”

Rowan blinked, thrown.

Mojave continued, tone mild. “Thought about giving you a night. Maybe two. Food. Sleep. Time for the swelling to go down. To help you shed your antlers.”

Rowan’s shoulders loosened just a fraction.

Then Mojave smiled. Not kindly.

“*Until*,” he added, “you went ahead and reminded me that this is all for payment.”

The air shifted.

Rowan’s stomach dropped.

“You made it very clear,” Mojave said, stepping closer now, voice low but precise, “that what bothers you isn’t the blood, or the bodies, or the things you’ve done.”

He leaned in slightly.

“It’s the idea of doing it for nothing.”

Rowan opened their mouth. “That’s not—”

“So,” Mojave interrupted smoothly, “I figured you could use a reminder.”

A reminder of what you’re capable of.

A reminder of what you’re so eager to walk away from.

His gaze flicked up to the antlers again, lingering this time. “And how much of yourself you’re willing to *throw* away.”

Rowan swallowed, throat tight. “You’re *punishing* me.”

Mojave tilted his head. “I’m *educating* you.”

He turned and walked toward the front door, gesturing for Rowan to follow, but then he paused, considering something, “Funny how that’s your concern though.. rather than shedding more blood.” He smirked. “Especially for someone who *supposedly* considers this evil.”

Rowan narrowed their eyes, opening their mouth to say something, to snap back, but realized they couldn’t. They didn’t have a proper rebuttal for that. And they hated themselves for it. The realization hit harder than the guilt did.

Mojave seemed pleased with that.

He stood quietly for a moment, before continuing with the hunt details, “You’re looking for a Simimorphus,” he said over his shoulder. “Rare thing. Real rare. Last one in this area, actually.”

Rowan stopped dead.

“...*What*.”

Mojave glanced back, eyes gleaming faintly. “When you take it out,” he continued, almost cheerfully, “you’ll be causing a local extinction.”

He smiled.

“*Lucky* you.”

Rowan stared at him like he’d just spoken another language. “What the *fuck* is wrong with you?”

“Oh, don’t get dramatic,” Mojave replied. “Extinction happens all the time. Usually slower. Messier. With a lot more denial.” He shrugged. “This is just... efficient.”

Rowan’s hands curled into fists. “You’re sick.”

Mojave hummed. “You’re *going*.”

He opened the front door, cold desert air spilling in. “Check behind the shed,” he added, stepping aside. “You’ll find the path that leads into the junkyard. He’s been hanging around there.. likes the quiet. The safety. Feels familiar, I imagine.”

Rowan didn’t move.

Mojave looked back at them, one brow lifting.

“And oh,” he said, almost as an afterthought, “try not to get kidnapped again.”

He gestured lazily toward Rowan’s head.

“I’d hate to see you turned into another *arts-and-crafts* project.”

Rowan stood there, breathing hard, antlers pulsing, rage and exhaustion tangling in their chest until they couldn’t tell which one was winning.

Mojave held their gaze for a long second.

Then, softly,

“Get going.”

The door stayed open.

And the desert waited.

Chapter End Notes

Idk how I never noticed, but I barely realized Hieronymus’s head is casually resting on the couch when you return to Mojave’s house after killing Atticus.

I never noticed that when watching Caseohs or Jay's gameplay. I only just noticed because I was copying down some of Mojave’s dialog. I always wondered why we never saw his head until now, and I wonder if that's why the TV is red when you walk in.

Chapter 20: Ouroboros Lab

Chapter Summary

MC goes to Ouroboros Lab to find the Simimorphus.

Chapter Notes

Alright yall. I have just finished my latest drawing and it's of Rowan. I'm ngl, I kinda struggled with this, because Rowan is Gender Neutral/Gender fluid in the story, because technically they're not SUPPOSED to have a Gender, since Rowan is the reader. Rowan is YOU guys. So.. Rowan can look however you want. They can be a girl or boy, whatever you like best. This drawing is simply my interpretation of Rowan. I tried REALLY hard to make Rowan look gender neutral, in-between a girl and boy. A rugged girl or a feminine boy that crawled out of Silent Hill but desert style. Androgynous.. if you will.

Also, I don't know what kind of crack I inhaled to be capable of rendering like that. My art style is usually NEVER that gorgeous and detailed. I really put a lot of magic into it. It kinda makes me laugh how high quality and super rendered Rowan is compared to my average styled drawing of Mojave. I feel a bit conflicted with my drawing though. I feel as though I made Rowan look too... attractive and not traumatized enough. And I kinda pictured them with darker hair, but it didn't compliment the skin tone. But, this IS pre-traumatized Rowan. So.. ͸(˘ͷ)͸

Anyway, I hope you enjoy it and this chapter. Drawing will be attached at the end ❤️

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Rowan didn't even bother arguing this time.

They just went, jaw clenched, head pounding, shotgun hanging off their shoulder like a half-forgotten limb.

Not because they wanted to. Not because they believed in anything Mojave said. But because the alternative, staying felt like standing still in a current that would eventually drag them under anyway. At least moving gave the illusion of choice.

Mojave's door clicked shut behind them, sealing off warmth, sealing off the argument, sealing off the momentary softness that neither of them would ever acknowledge or experience again. Whatever fucked up bond they shared was gone now.

And the desert had changed its mind about them.

It wasn't the Arizona heat that usually baked thought right out of your skull. Tonight, winter had rolled in with a petty little cruelty, cold that slid under clothes, under skin, straight into the bones. The wind had teeth. It gnawed at Rowan's ears, their wrists, the exposed edges of their throat, and every gust made the antlers pulse like angry bruises being poked from the inside.

Each step jarred their head.

Each heartbeat tried to pry the antlers loose from the places Atticus had anchored them.

Rowan kept one hand tight around the shotgun anyway, the other occasionally lifting instinctively to hover near their scalp before they remembered pain and jerked it back down like they'd touched a stove.

"Just... finish the job," they muttered to themselves, breath fogging. "Just.. do it and be *done*."

Behind the shed, the path Mojave mentioned, dirt worn down by repeated footsteps, tire tracks, and the drag marks of things that didn't want to be moved. It narrowed quickly, funneling Rowan into a corridor of scattered junk, broken appliances, rusted bed frames, cracked coolers, old tires stacked like little monuments to bad decisions.

Then the cabins started.

Small wooden structures, half shack and half storage, lined crookedly along the trail like they'd been dropped there and forgotten. Every porch was choked with clutter. Every window looked blind. Some had padlocks. Some had chains. Some had nothing at all, like the place was daring anyone to try.

And the lamp posts, thin wooden poles with weak yellow bulbs lit the trail in patches, flickering like they were tired too.

Rowan kept walking.

That's when they saw the masks.

Hockey masks.

Old and cracked at the edges, stained with yellow and dirt. Some painted. Some smeared with what looked like dried mud until Rowan got closer and their stomach dropped at the darker stains that weren't mud at all.

They were everywhere.

Strung up in trees like ornaments. Nailed to wooden stakes. Hanging from wire like wind chimes. Propped up on the edge of a roof, watching the trail with empty eyes.

Jason Voorhees would've quit his job on sight.

Rowan's grip tightened on the shotgun.

"...Oh," they muttered, voice flat "Cute. I love the.. serial killer pinterest decor.. very.. Voorhees coquette."

A mask turned slightly in the wind, and for half a second their exhausted brain tried to convince them it moved on its own.

Rowan flipped it off without thinking. "Yeah. You too."

The path pinched into a pipe tunnel ahead, one of those huge drainage tubes, rusted and ribbed, half-buried in the earth. It swallowed the lamplight. The far end was a dark circle with faint moonlight leaking in like it didn't want to commit.

Rowan paused at the mouth of it, listening.

Nothing but wind.

No footsteps. No squealing beasts. No soft owl hum.

Just the tunnel breathing cold air at them.

They stepped in.

The inside smelled like damp metal and old rot. Their boots clanged in a way that made every nerve light up. Rowan kept the shotgun angled down, shoulders hunched, head throbbing with pain. Their footsteps echoed weirdly, metallic and uneven, bouncing around until it sounded like someone was walking behind them. They didn't look back. Nothing good had ever come from looking back.

The tunnel was short, maybe thirty feet, but the echo was loud enough to rattle their skull. Water dripped overhead. Their antlers scraped once, sending a painful vibration through their entire skull.

"*Ffff—uck—*" Rowan hissed, bracing a hand on the concrete.

the whole time, Rowan felt watched, like the darkness wasn't empty, it was occupied.

Finally, the end of the pipe widened.

Rowan stepped out and froze so hard they almost tripped on their own feet.

A lake.

A massive lake.

And it was the wrong color.

Even under moonlight, it didn't read as water. It read as something thick and dark, slick and glossy, rippling slow like it had weight. The air above it smelled like iron.

Blood.

Rowan's stomach did that cold drop again, the one that made nausea feel like a reflex. "Oh god," they whispered, covering their nose and mouth. The metallic iron smell was pungent as hell. They're almost surprised they didn't smell it behind the tunnel from miles away.

They took a step closer anyway, because their brain was apparently addicted to confirming horrors.

The shore was crusted with dried reddish-black residue like the lake had been higher once, then receded, leaving rings. The mud wasn't mud. It was... sludge. Sticky. Wrong.

And beside it, looming up like a shadowy altar, stood a massive building. Concrete and metal, brutal and industrial, with dead windows and a roofline that looked too sharp against the sky. A sign bolted to the front read:

OUROBUROS LAB

The letters were old, but not that old. Like someone still cared enough to keep the name. Junk littered the front, broken crates, twisted fencing, old lab carts half buried in sand. A place abandoned, but not forgotten.

Rowan stared between the blood lake and the lab, pulse thudding.

"This isn't real," they muttered, voice cracking slightly. "This is... I'm hallucinating. This is antler-induced psychosis. This is my brain doing a little artsy interpretive dance with trauma. This is what happens when you don't sleep and you get *arts-and-crafts'd* in the skull."

They walked to the edge of the lake.

They crouched, hesitated, and then.. because apparently they were committed to suffering, reached out and dipped their fingers in.

Warm.

Not body-warm, but warmer than the cold desert air.

Thick.

Viscous.

It clung to their skin in a way water didn't.

Rowan held their hand up to the moonlight and stared at the dark red sheen across their fingertips.

"...yeah, thats not.. kool aid," they whispered, horrified.

Then something moved.

Not a ripple.

Not wind.

Something under the surface, displacing the lake in a slow, deliberate swell.

Rowan's head lifted. Their hand froze midair, dripping red back into the water.

A shape rose, just barely, like a spine rolling beneath skin. A line of scales breached the surface for a second, slick and patterned, then sank again.

Rowan blinked hard.

Their brain tried to file it under hallucination. Under concussion. Under trauma.

Their brain failed.

Rowan took one cautious step closer, shotgun lifting slightly.

"...Hello?" they called, immediately regretting how stupid that sounded. "Hi. Um. If you're—if you're a *metaphor*, can you maybe—"

The lake bulged.

And suddenly..

BAM.

The surface exploded.

A giant snake surged upward, from the water—no.. blood, sheeting off it in heavy curtains. Its head rose higher and higher, the body still coming, a living column, scales reflecting moonlight like wet armor. Its eyes were bright glowing red.. red red, fixed on Rowan like they were a bug that had wandered into the wrong pantry.

The thing kept rising until it eclipsed the moon.

Rowan's whole body locked.

Then their survival instincts finally woke up.

"OH FUCK—NO—ABSOLUTELY NOT—*FUCK YOU*—" Rowan yelped, scrambling backward so fast they nearly ate dirt. They clutched the shotgun like it was a security blanket that could magically explain why there was a blood lake snake the size of a building.

The snake's head tilted slightly, like it was curious.

Rowan pointed at it with the shotgun like that would establish dominance. "Y—YOU—YOU stay over there! You—you long *SPAGHETTI DEMON*—"

The snake leaned closer.

Rowan made a noise that was somewhere between a curse and a panicked squeak and bolted.

They ran like their bones had been replaced with electricity, boots slipping in sand, antlers throbbing violently with every jarring step, shotgun bouncing against their shoulder.

They sprinted straight for the lab.

The door was heavy. Metal. Industrial. Those type of doors that were rusted in place from the heat and difficult to move, like pushing a massive boulder.

They slammed into the lab's front doors, accidentally knocking their antlers into it, "*AH—FF.UCKK.. MOTHER..FUCKER—*" They fumbled for the handle with shaking hands. The antlers caught air, pain spearing down their spine, but fear powered right through it.

"OPEN! OPEN—" Rowan snarled at the door like it was personally disrespecting them.

The handle gave.

Rowan yanked the door open, dove inside, and whipped it shut behind them so hard the hinges screamed, then pressed their whole weight into the door anyway, breathing hard like they'd been running for miles.

For a second, they just stood there, head against the metal, gulping air. Their heart was trying to escape their ribs.

Then Rowan slowly slid down the door until they were sitting on the floor.

Their hands shook so badly the shotgun rattled against their knee.

"...Please," they whispered to whatever god was still ignoring them. *"Please tell me that wasn't the Simimorphus."*

Rowan swallowed, eyes squeezed shut, voice rising into an exhausted, furious prayer.

"Because if Mojave expects me to shoot a giant demon snake out of a blood lake with a shotgun—" they panted, *"—I'm going back and I'm shoving these antlers so far up his ass he'll pick TV channels by turning his head. I will invent new violence."*

Rowan stayed pressed to the lab door for a few more seconds, like their body didn't trust reality enough to move yet.

They listened.

No scrape of scales. No heavy impact. No wet thump of something enormous dragging itself across the blood-lake shore.

Just... silence. And the hum of electricity.

Rowan exhaled shakily, forehead still against the cold metal, and then immediately regretted it when their antlers throbbed like someone was tapping nails into their skull. They hissed,

peeled themselves off the door, and turned.

The Ouroboros Lab greeted them like a hospital that hated people.

Black-and-white checkered floor tiles stretched down narrow corridors, scuffed and filthy, some cracked like the place had been punched in the face. The walls were white once. Now they were... white-ish. Stained. Smudged. Marked by old handprints and dried streaks that looked like somebody had slid down them in a hurry.. or been dragged.

The lighting overhead was clinical and wrong, cold white fluorescents buzzing faintly, flickering like they were trying to decide if they wanted to stay alive. Every flash made the hallway stutter, turning the lab into a slideshow of rot and emptiness.

Rowan lifted the shotgun slightly, not aiming at anything, just needing the weight of it to feel like they weren't completely naked in a place like this.

“Okay,” they muttered. “*Okay*.. we're fine..ish.”

They moved forward, careful. Boots squeaked faintly on tile. The air smelled stale, old disinfectant buried under copper and mildew. There were barricades in the halls, broken furniture shoved across doorways, a toppled filing cabinet half-blocking a corridor, desk legs snapped like someone had tried to make a fort in the apocalypse.

Some doors were wooden, older than the rest of the building's vibe, locked with heavy brass padlocks or sliding latches. A few had scratches across them, long and deep, like something had tried to get out... or get in.

And then there were stains.

Blood stains.

Not fresh enough to glisten, but not old enough to be harmless either. Rust-brown arcs, smears, drops, like a trail that never bothered to finish its story.

Rowan's stomach did that tight little twist again.

One door sat half-open farther down the hall, like it had been left in a hurry. The edge of it creaked faintly when the building shifted, an exhausted old sound.

Rowan approached it slowly, shotgun ready, and nudged it open with their shoulder.

Inside was an office.

Sort of.

Eight wooden desks filled the room, arranged like a classroom that tried to be professional and gave up. Two desks had been shoved together, creating three groups, like a meeting was interrupted mid-sentence and everyone just ran.

Papers were everywhere.

Loose sheets littered the desks and spilled onto the floor like snow. File folders gaped open. Clipboards lay abandoned. A coffee mug sat on its side, dried brown ring spread out beneath it. The air in here was even worse, dusty, old paper, papery, with the faint sick sweetness of old blood hiding underneath.

Rowan stepped in and the door behind them eased shut halfway on its own, like the room didn't want witnesses.

They didn't like that.

Rowan moved deeper in, eyes scanning, head pounding. The antlers cast warped shadows on the wall every time the lights flickered, like something behind them was wearing a crown made of accusation.

They drifted toward one desk in particular, and paused.

A folder lay dead-center.

Stamped across the front in huge red letters,

CLASSIFIED

Rowan stared at it.

Then snorted dryly. "Yeah.. cause someone will stop me, right?"

Their fingers hesitated a second, pure reflex, like touching anything in this building might curse them.

Then they opened it.

Inside was a notebook, shoved into the folder like it had been hidden quickly. The cover was worn, corners bent. Somebody had handled it a lot. Maybe too much.

Rowan flipped it open.

The first page hit like a confession.

"Evacuation has begun.

I'm writing this as fast as I can.

If you're reading this, take these notes and leave now.

There has been a catastrophic containment failure.

The things we created here... the things I created... forgive me.

Listen carefully.. DO NOT ENTER THE LOWER LEVELS.

The following pages will be everything that led to our undoing and the shame I will carry with me forever.

It's everything, every violation, every experiment, every life we destroyed.

The world needs to know the truth."

Rowan's throat went tight.

They read it again, slower.

"*Catastrophic containment failure?*" Rowan repeated.

They flipped to the next page.

And froze.

Shreds.

The following pages weren't just torn out, they'd been shredded. Not cleanly removed, not censored neatly, destroyed in a way that felt frantic. Some pieces were still half-attached to the binding like ragged teeth. Little confetti strips fluttered when Rowan turned the paper, whispering uselessly.

Rowan flipped again. And again.

More shredded pages.

Half a sentence here, cut off. A number there. A smudged diagram that might've been... a map? Or a body? Or something worse?

Nothing readable. Nothing whole.

Like somebody, a whistleblower maybe, wanted the world to know a disaster happened, but something or someone refused to let anyone know why.

Rowan's grip tightened on the notebook, knuckles paling. Their mind started doing that thing minds do in places like this, filling the gaps with horror.

A containment failure in a lab called Ouroboros.

A blood lake outside.

A giant snake with red eyes.

Talking deer.

Mojave.

Those weird red pulsing tentacles twitching out of the ground like everyday weeds.

Rowan swallowed hard, a slow, sick realization slithering up their spine.

“...Is this why?” Rowan whispered. Their voice sounded too loud in the empty office.

They stared at the shredded pages as if staring harder would stitch them back together.

“What if this is why all the animals out there—” they stopped, the thought catching like a splinter. “What if... that’s why they talk. Walk. *Think*.”

Their eyes flicked up, scanning the office again, as if they might find an answer hiding in the dust.

“What if... that’s why Mojave is like the way he is?” Rowan murmured, and they hated how small their voice sounded.

They forced themselves to breathe.

Because if that was true...

Then Mojave wasn’t just some freak of nature who crawled out of the desert like a myth.

He was something made. Man made. By them.

With intention.

Like a weapon.

Or a failed illegal experiment.

Rowan’s gaze dropped back to the notebook. They turned it over, searching for anything else, a stamp, a name, a date. Something that would anchor it in reality. But the building didn’t want to give them that comfort.

The lights flickered again, harsh and cold, and for a split second Rowan saw their own shadow ripple across the desk, antlers and all, and it looked less like a human shadow and more like a warning sign.

Rowan shut the folder slowly.

Their breathing was a little too fast. “Okay,” they whispered. “*Okay*. So... don’t go to the lower levels.”

They looked toward the hallway again, toward the deeper parts of the lab. And the building, silent and patient, felt like it was waiting for them to do exactly what the notebook begged them not to do.

Rowan stepped out of the office and let the door fall shut behind them, the air in the hallway colder now, like the building exhaled as soon as they left.

They rubbed a hand down their face, antlers throbbing in slow cruel pulses.

They barely made it five steps before..

FWUMP—!!

Something shot up from the corner of the intersecting hall.

A white hockey mask on a wooden pole snapped upright with a spring-loaded thwack, lunging right into Rowan's face like a budget haunted house prop.

Rowan yelped, actually yelped, and stumbled backward, shotgun almost slipping from their hand.

“THE FU—What the—YOU.. you.. YOU CHEAP WALMART JUMPSCARE—!”

They stood there, heart slamming, staring at the stupid mask wobbling in front of them.

Just a hockey mask.

Strapped to a *stick*.

Designed to do nothing but scream “*boo*.”

Rowan blinked. “...What the hell?” they muttered, lowering the shotgun. “What’s the point of that? Who is that supposed to warn? Jason Voorhees himself??”

The mask bobbed slightly in the draft, looking smug about its job.

Rowan shoved it aside with a scowl and kept walking.

The next hallway was narrow, claustrophobic, the ceiling lower here, the fluorescent lights struggling harder than ever. Trash littered the floor, loose paper, tipped-over bins, ripped folders, chunks of ceiling tile. Nothing moved. Nothing breathed. Nothing made sense.

Rowan nudged open a door labeled RESTROOM.

They regretted it immediately.

The bathroom was destroyed, mirrors cracked, stalls hanging crooked, a toilet overflowing with paper and filth. The floor was a sea of documents smeared into something brownish from water or... something else.

Rowan backed out slowly. “I’m not getting tetanus and antler pain today. Pick one.”

They continued on.

The hallway curved left, and the floor became even more littered, like the place coughed up every piece of paper it ever held. Each step shuffled debris around their boots, making the silence feel louder.

At the far end of the hall sat something that made Rowan stop dead.

A red elevator.

Or what used to be one.

The doors were stuck halfway open, just a narrow gap wide enough to peek into but not wide enough to squeeze through. Inside,

It looked like an elevator made specifically to deliver you to hell and back.

Blood coated the walls in thick, splattered sheets. Dried bits of gore clung to metal corners. Bone fragments littered the floor like someone shoved a ribcage into a blender. Deep claw marks carved across one wall, dragging downward like something tried to climb out while being torn apart.

The light inside flickered pale and sickly over the carnage, revealing more every time it blinked on.

Rowan stared.

Then..

They stepped back carefully, resisting the urge to throw up.

Turning down the next hall..

CLICK—SPRING—FWUMP!!

Another goddamn hockey mask rocket-launched out of the floor like a possessed jack-in-the-box.

Rowan jumped a full foot in the air and let out a strangled, furious girly scream,

“STOP!! ST—STOP IT. **STOP** DOING THAT!”

They kicked the stick out of the way and stomped past it, rubbing their face with both hands.

“Who put these here?! WHY?! What is the *point*?!” They threw their hands up. “If this is supposed to be psychological warfare, congratulations—it’s WORKING.”

Their antlers throbbed in frustration.

Rowan pressed a palm to their forehead, took a shaky breath, and continued deeper into the lab.

The traps weren’t dangerous.

They weren’t meant to wound.

They were just meant to scare.

Which, somehow, was worse.

Because whatever needed warning traps this cheap? Was probably much, *much* worse.

Rowan pushed the door open and stepped into the room like they expected it to bite.

It didn't.

It just... watched.

The air was stale and trapped, warmer than the hallways like someone had been sitting in here long enough to make their own weather. Two cheap lamps, both dimmed down like the room didn't want to be seen threw pools of yellow light across the floor. Everything outside those pools dissolved into shadow.

A mattress lay on the concrete, dry-stained and flattened like it had been slept on with boots still on. One whole wall was practically buried, rubble, broken furniture, piles of trash stacked like a barricade someone built in a panic and never finished. Papers were everywhere, crumpled and spread across the floor like the building had been shedding skin.

On the right, a cushioned chair, worn in the seat, a human-shaped dent in the padding. Next to it, bottles. Too many. Some empty, some half full, the glass catching lamp light like little teeth.

The room looked... lived in.

And that was a problem.

Rowan's antlers threw a warped shadow up the wall, two black branches that made them look like something from an old forest nightmare. At the far end of the room there was a desk, and over it on the wall, was a red chalk arrow pointed down like a shrine marker. Right beneath the arrows sat a hockey mask resting against a white block, intentional, placed like an offering.

Rowan stared at it, throat tightening.

A sound clicked behind them.

CH-CHK.

A shotgun cocking.

Rowan froze so hard their bones felt like they locked.

A barrel pressed close enough behind their skull that they could feel the intent of it.

A low, rough voice spoke through the darkness behind them.

"Move," a voice growled behind them, low and gruff, "and I'll *blow* your head clean off, you goddamn *freak*."

Rowan didn't breathe.

The voice was steady, tired anger, the kind that's been reheated a hundred times and still burns.

"Not enough meat out there, huh?" the voice went on. "So you came here to finish me too? Turn around. Real slow. No sudden moves."

Rowan swallowed, throat scraping.

Shit.

Shit.

Rowan didn't dare twitch.

They didn't lift their hands. They didn't try anything heroic. They just... slowly shifted their grip and held the shotgun out away from their body, barrel angled down, as if offering proof they weren't about to do something stupid.

Then they turned.

Slowly.

Every inch felt like risking their entire life.

When they faced the stranger fully,

He stood there pointing a 12-gauge at them, mask and all.

Hockey mask strapped tight to his face. Brownish green leather jacket, scuffed and dusted like he'd slept in it. Black shirt underneath. Jeans, boots, the whole "*I survived the apocalypse and all I got was trauma*" package. He looked like he'd crawled out of a nightmare season of television and decided to live here anyway.

He stared at Rowan.

Rowan stared back.

For one long second, neither of them moved.

Then the man's shotgun lowered, just a fraction as his posture shifted from kill to confused.

"...Wait."

His head tilted.

"...You're *human*?"

Rowan blinked, stunned by the question, because what else would they be..? And then their antlers throbbed and reminded them exactly why that question existed.

The man reached up, fingers trembling a little, and ripped the hockey mask off like he needed to see Rowan's face to believe it.

A man.

A *human* man.

He had tired eyes. The kind that don't widen anymore because they've widened too many times. Stubble. A scar near one cheekbone. A jaw that looked like it clenched in his sleep.

He squinted at Rowan like they were a mirage.

"I thought I was the last one left around here.." he said quietly.

Rowan's mouth opened.

Nothing came out for a second.

Their brain kept trying to file him into categories that made sense, predator, beast, trap, talking animal, horror prop, anything but human.

And then, like a cruel punchline, Mojave's words echoed,

Last of its kind in the area. So when you take it out you will be causing an extinction... Lucky you.

Rowan's stomach turned.

Simimorphus.

That was what Mojave had called it.

Rowan had assumed a monster.

Not... this.

Not a man with chapped lips and a dead look in his eyes and a trembling thumb still riding the safety of his gun.

Rowan swallowed again, voice hoarse. "Yeah," they managed. "I'm... human."

The man blinked hard, like his eyes hurt.

Then his gaze flicked up.

To the antlers.

He tensed again, but not with aggression this time, more like he didn't know what to do with the sight.

"...What the hell happened to you?" he asked, quieter.

Rowan let out a sound that wasn't quite a laugh. "You want the short version or the one that ruins your faith in anything nice?"

The man's mouth twitched like he almost smiled. Almost.

"*Short*," he said.

Rowan stared at him, then glanced around the room, the mattress, the bottles, the desperate little attempt at a home inside a slaughterhouse of a building.

"An owl did arts and crafts on my skull," Rowan said flatly.

The man paused.

"...An *owl*."

Rowan winced. "I know how that sounds."

The man let out a hollow laugh. "Kid, at this point? I'll believe anything."

He stared, then, god help him, he gave a short, disbelieving breath that might have been laughter if he hadn't sounded so broken. "Christ."

Rowan's antlers pulsed again, and they winced, shifting their weight.

The man noticed the wince immediately. His voice softened, against his will. "You're hurt."

Rowan's stare snapped back to cold. "*Fuck off*."

"*Wow*, okay.. didn't mean to shit in your fucking cereal, Samantha.."

Rowan briefly glanced away from the man, like as if any shred of kindness from a stranger was a personal offense to Rowan. Atticus did that.

The man sighed.

Then he raised one hand, palm out. "I'm not— I'm not trying to—" He exhaled, visibly resetting himself. "Look. I'm not your enemy."

Rowan's gaze hardened. "That's what the owl said too."

That landed hard.

The man's jaw tightened, and for a second his expression sharpened into something darker. Recognition. Not of Atticus specifically, but of the type. The smiling kind. The "*helpful*" kind.

He nodded once, slow. "Fair."

The man stared a moment longer, then finally lowered his shotgun all the way and leaned it against the chair like he'd decided, temporarily, not to shoot.

Rowan did not copy him. Rowan kept their gun in their hands, if anything, tightening their grip on it.

The man clocked that immediately. His eyes slid to Rowan's grip, then back up.

"Smart," he said, like it was a compliment and an insult at the same time. "Don't put it down. Not around here."

Rowan let out a thin breath. "I wasn't planning on it."

For a second, the silence between them had weight. Not peaceful. Not safe. Just... strange. Two humans in a place that didn't feel like it had room for humans anymore.

Then the man gestured with his chin toward the desk, toward the arrow.

"You followed the masks in?"

Rowan's mouth tightened. "Your stupid little jumpscare traps? Yeah. I'm gonna haunt you for those."

The man's eyebrows lifted. "They work though."

"They work on my patience," Rowan snapped. "Not my survival instincts."

That earned a real small smirk from him.

Silence stretched again, two humans measuring each other in a place where humans apparently went extinct.

Then the man spoke again, voice lower, like the words tasted bad. "There was a group of us," he said. "We lived in the junkyard. Survived off whatever we could find. Water. Cans. Rats. You know. The glamorous end of civilization."

Rowan stayed still, listening.

The man's gaze drifted somewhere past Rowan, into memory. "Then people started disappear'n," he continued. "At first it was one. Then two. Then the ones who wandered off to take a leak. Then the ones who went to scavenge and didn't come back. Desert does that.. it swallows people."

He swallowed.

"By the time I realized we were being hunted..." his voice cracked slightly and he covered it with a rough breath, "...it was too late."

Rowan's grip tightened on their shotgun.

The man's eyes got distant, glassy. "Woke up one night to screaming. Went outside and found blood... and pulp. Like someone put my friends through a wood chipper."

Rowan's stomach rolled.

The man's voice dropped even further. "I followed the trail up the road to that old house," he said. "I thought it was a person. A gang. A cult. Something I could at least... understand."

His eyes flicked up to Rowan.

"What I found wasn't human," he said. "Tall. Covered in orange fur. Ears like a cat." His mouth twisted. "It was chopping my friends into pieces. Strong enough to chop through bone like it was nothing."

Rowan felt their chest tighten.

Mojave.

The man kept going, voice bitter now. "I slipped out before it saw me. I didn't go back to the junkyard. I couldn't. I knew it wasn't safe, and I knew if I stayed I'd end up as... whatever was left in that yard."

He gestured around the room. "So I came here. Lab's old as hell, but sturdy. And these—?" he gestured toward the hockey masks, "found 'em in storage. That thing must hate 'em. Never comes close."

Rowan frowned. "He's scared of *hockey masks*?"

"Not scared," the man said. "Hates 'em. Some animals get fixated on faces. Something about this shape pisses him off."

Rowan didn't even know what to do with that.

The hockey masks.

Mojave... *hates* them?

The traps that did nothing but jump-scare.

They weren't for show.

They weren't for humans.

They were for keeping Mojave away.

Rowan's eyes narrowed harder.

That didn't fit. Mojave didn't hate things like that. Mojave hated weakness. Mojave hated hesitation. Mojave hated anyone else thinking they were special.

Rowan swallowed.

The man stepped closer, studying Rowan now with a survivor's eyes, shoulders rolling like he'd been carrying the weight of this plan for too long.

“I’ve been preparing,” he said. “Got a plan to take it down.”

Rowan’s spine went cold.

A plan to take down Mojave.

Old Rowan would’ve thought, *good. Kill him.*

Current Rowan felt something complicated and rotten stir in their gut.

Because yes.. Mojave was a nightmare.

But Mojave was also... a constant. A *gravity*. Something Rowan’s entire world had been forced to orbit. Killing him felt like cutting your own tether mid-flight.

It should’ve tasted like freedom.

Instead it tasted like... wrongness. Like *bile*.

The man leaned forward slightly, reading Rowan’s face. “And now that you’re here,” he continued, “maybe you can help me. Two humans. Better odds.”

Rowan didn’t answer.

The man’s gaze flicked toward the hallway, then back. “This building isn’t what it looks like,” he said. “There’s something deep below. Lower levels. I haven’t gotten down there yet.” He gestured toward the gore-stained elevator direction without looking. “I’ve been working on getting the elevator fixed.”

Rowan’s throat tightened, remembering the shredded notebook pages. The warning. *DO NOT ENTER THE LOWER LEVELS.*

Rowan didn’t like how the pieces were lining up. They forced their voice steady. “Why haven’t you left?”

The man stared like the question offended something raw in him. Then he laughed, one harsh, humorless breath.

“Leave where?” he asked. “The desert? The junkyard? The lake of blood with the big snake in it?” He shook his head. “I tried. Everything out there wants you dead. At least in here I can lock doors.”

Rowan’s eyes narrowed. “And you think you can kill it.”

The man’s expression sharpened, stubborn and bright under all that exhaustion. “I know I can hurt it,” he said. “I’ve watched it. Patterns. Routes. It thinks it owns everything, so it gets sloppy. Confident.” His jaw clenched. “I’m *tired* of being prey.”

Rowan’s antlers pulsed again, like a reminder.

Rowan took a slow breath.

They didn't trust this man.

Not fully.

Not after Atticus.

Not after kindness had turned into cages.

But hearing a human voice again, seeing human eyes in a world of teeth, did something to Rowan's brain that felt almost... involuntary.

A terrible nostalgia.

Like seeing your own species after thinking you'd died out.

Rowan's gaze flicked to the bottles by the chair. "How long have you been here?"

The man didn't answer immediately. Then, quietly, "Long enough to stop counting."

Rowan's mouth pressed into a line.

Then flatly, they say, "And I'm supposed to just—what? Trust you? You don't exactly strike me as trustworthy."

The man scoffed. "Yeah? Well, Right back at ya, kid. You showed up with antlers and a shotgun. Don't exactly scream '*friendly*.'"

Rowan's lip twitched. "You pointed a gun at my head first."

"'Cause last time something came down that hallway, it tried to rip my spine out my *ass*."

Rowan grimaced. "...Fair."

They circled each other verbally the way two stray dogs circle over the same bone.

They could feel the choice hovering in the air like a blade.

Mojave wanted this man dead.

And here he was offering a way out that tasted like betrayal.

Rowan's fingers tightened around their shotgun. Their palms were still stained, even after washing. Their antlers still hurt. Their skull still remembered drills.

Rowan wasn't comfortable.

But it was strangely grounding to see another human face. It reminded them they didn't hallucinate their past. Didn't hallucinate what they used to be. Didn't hallucinate the world they came from.

Still, the question sat in Rowan's throat, buzzing.

Kill Mojave?

Even thinking it tasted wrong.

The idea of Mojave dead left a bitter film on their tongue, something instinctively nauseating.

Because even if he was monstrous...

Even if he'd drowned them...

Even if he'd broken them...

Mojave was...

inevitably theirs.

And they were his.

Rowan hated that.

Rowan hated themselves for that.

But it didn't make it less true.

The man crossed his arms. "Well? *You in?*"

Rowan inhaled slowly.

Exhaled shakily.

Their voice came out soft but firm,

"...How do you plan to kill it?"

 Rowan Fanart

Chapter End Notes

I had to include the snake easter egg 🐍❤️

Chapter 21: The Final Hunt

Chapter Summary



Very mild gore.

Chapter Notes

EXTRA long chapter for yall. That's why this took a minute to release. I hope you enjoy. Yall promise not to send death threats after this chapter, right..? Right? RIGHT?

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

The man's mouth curved, not into a smile, exactly, but something sharper. With the grim vindictive satisfaction of someone who had been waiting for someone, anyone, to finally ask him that.

"Come on," he said, jerking his head for Rowan to follow. "Gonna need to show you."

Rowan hesitated, then followed, but not close.

Just close enough to see him.

Close enough to shoot if this turned into another Atticus Situation. shotgun still gripped, antlers brushing the doorframe as they ducked out of the room.

The man walked through the clutter like he'd memorized every obstacle months ago.

Rowan's boots crunched paper and shattered glass behind him.

The hallway swallowed them again, still littered with paper and debris. The man moved with the wary ease of someone who'd already mapped every creak and shadow. Rowan followed a few paces back, watching him like he might spin around with the shotgun again at any second.

"First thing you gotta understand," he said as they walked, "you don't fight that thing like you'd fight a man."

"Yeah," Rowan muttered. "Trust me, I've noticed."

“I mean it.” He glanced over his shoulder. “You try to square up, go toe-to-toe? You’re dead. It’s stronger. Faster. Meaner. Jumps higher. Sees better in the dark. Smells everything.”

Rowan rolled their eyes. “Wow, you’re *really* selling me on this plan.”

He ignored that. “So you don’t fight it as a man,” he repeated. “You *hunt* it as an animal.”

They turned down another corridor, stepping over a fallen light fixture. At the end of the hall, a door had been pried open and wedged with a broken chair. The man nudged it aside with his boot and gestured Rowan in.

The room inside was long, cluttered. Shelves along the walls were piled with junk, coils of steel cable, rusted traps, snapped netting, canvas sacks, empty chemical tins, cracked plastic jugs, toolboxes. Someone had been collecting with a purpose.

Rowan stopped just inside the doorway.

“Jesus,” they muttered. “You rob a hunting store?”

“More like five,” he said dryly, pushing past to rummage through a crate. “Found half of this shit in the junkyard. Rest from supply sheds out there.” He nodded vaguely toward the desert. “Old world left us a lot of toys. Just had to dig them up.”

Rowan stared. “...You’ve been planning this *awhile*.”

The man grunted, “Awhile? Kid, I’ve been planning this damn thing since the day I heard that monster *laugh*.” He pulled out a coil of thick metal cable and let it drop at Rowan’s feet. It thunked heavily.

“Cable restraints,” he said. “Snare lines. We rig ‘em high. Think... big-game traps.”

Rowan looked down at the coil, then back at him. “You’re gonna... snare him?”

“Damn *right* I am.”

A humorless little huff of air escaped Rowan’s nose. “You do realize he has thumbs, right?”

“Mm-hm.” The man pulled another coil, this one already prepared into a noose loop with a locking mechanism. “Restraints aren’t perfect. They’re just time-buyers. You don’t get dead by thinking one thing will work.” He shot Rowan a sideways look. “You layer it. Like a hunting blind. Or a minefield.”

Rowan folded their arms. “So we’re... what. Just gonna leave big obvious loops on the ground and hope he steps in?”

The man gave them an unimpressed look. “Kid, if you think snares only go on the ground, you’ve never seen a real trapper work.”

He pointed up, tapping a ceiling beam with the back of his knuckles. “He moves like a cat. So you rig it for a cat. Shoulder height. Throat height. Jumps at you? Neck in the loop.

Lunges down a hall? Leg in the loop.” He smirked faintly. “You ever watch video of a cougar hitting a line snare? It’s a thing of beauty.”

Rowan pictured Mojave caught mid-leap, yanked backward. The image hit weird, equal parts grim satisfaction and... some uncomfortable dread.

The man moved to a shelf, grabbed a dented metal tin, and popped the lid. A sharp citrus smell hit Rowan in the face.

They recoiled. “*Ugh*. What is that?”

“Orange oil. Concentrated.” He closed it again. “I got lemon and lime, too. Some vinegar.” He gestured at a crate filled with glass jars and jugs. “Cats hate citrus. Messes with their nose. Overwhelm the senses, you buy yourself confusion.”

Rowan blinked. “...You’re gonna throw *salad* dressing at him.”

The man didn’t even crack. “We’re gonna *gas* him.”

That shut Rowan up.

He crouched beside another crate and pulled out what looked like homemade pipe bombs, short sections of metal pipe, capped at both ends, with makeshift fuses and little slits bored into the sides.

“Smoke charges,” he said. “Not the fancy kind. Just pressure and mix. Pack ‘em with soaked cloth, citrus oil, vinegar, some stinging powder I scraped out of old rodenticide.” He held one up between two fingers. “Light. Toss. Boom. Whole hallway smells like Hell’s cleaning aisle and chemical burn. Eyes, nose, lungs.. overloaded.”

Rowan stared. “You... wanna gas him with... cat hate and poison dust.”

“You got a better idea?” he shot back.

Rowan opened their mouth. Closed it. “...Continue.”

He set the “bomb” down carefully. “He can handle pain. Can’t chew through disorientation.” He tapped his temple. “Predators hunt with clarity. He loses that even for twenty seconds? That’s when we move.”

Rowan frowned. “And the rodenticide?”

“Fine print on those labels?” he said lightly. “Most of that powder’s meant to mess up nervous systems and organ function. I’ve been separating some of the dust. Get enough of it in the air, he’s not gonna drop dead on the spot, but it’s gonna slow reaction times. Slur his nerves. You ever watched a poisoned coyote try to bolt? Looks like its whole body’s lagging.”

Rowan grimaced. “That’s... kind of fucked up.”

He snorted. “You’re walking around wearing antlers sewn into your skull and I’m the fucked-up one?”

Rowan was about to snap back before surrendering, begrudgingly. “...*Touché*.”

He moved to another corner and hauled up something heavy, a brutal, ugly contraption made of welded bars, leather straps and thick buckles, metal plates welded across the front.

Rowan squinted at it. “...What the hell is that?”

“Muzzle.”

Rowan just stared. “...I’m sorry?”

“For him.” The man patted the awful thing like it was a loyal dog. “Found bits of this in a veterinary clinic, rest I welded myself. Padding’s old firehose. Once it’s on, that mouth isn’t opening again unless we want it to.”

Rowan stared at the straps, at the contoured metal meant to clamp around a jaw. They imagined it on Mojave’s face, covering his teeth, pressing into his fur. They didn’t like how that made their stomach feel. Not... bad. Not good. Just dangerously complicated.

“He’s.. not just teeth,” Rowan said quietly. “He’s claws. Speed. Brute force.”

“Which is why the muzzle’s the third part,” the man said, standing again. He jerked his chin toward another wall.

There, neatly arranged across a makeshift workbench, were more tools of an ugly craft, large steel hooks bolted to chain. Meat hooks. Nets. Collars. Hooked barbs. Chalk marks on the concrete floor outlining crude diagrams.

He walked over and tapped one of the chalk diagrams. It was a rough overhead sketch of a corridor, boxes marking walls, arrows marking directions, Xs in specific spots.

“This is the hallway just before you enter this wing,” he said. “We lure him here. Force him into a lane.”

“How?” Rowan asked warily.

The man reached under the workbench and pulled out a small metal device, square, dented, with a single switch and a cracked speaker grill.

A distress beacon.

Rowan blinked. “...That’s for coyotes.”

“Yeah,” the man said. “And wolves. And bobcats. And anything else that gets curious when it hears something dying.”

He flipped the switch with his thumb.

A test chirp sputtered out, high-pitched, sharp, almost deer like, like something small and panicked gasping for air. Even that one-second pulse made Rowan's skin crawl.

The man shut it off again.

"That sound'll carry across the desert," he said. "And he'll hear it." His jaw tightened. "He always hears it. Predators go right for the weak one."

Rowan's chest tightened. "You're going to bait him in with a fake wounded animal."

"Bait him?" The man snorted. "Kid, this isn't *bait*."

He held up the beacon.

"This is a dinner bell."

Rowan looked at it, at that harmless little box, and felt their pulse spike with something they didn't want to name.

The man pocketed the beacon, nodding once, efficient. "We set it off when we're ready. He'll come fast."

Rowan swallowed.

Too fast, they thought.

But they didn't say it.

The man straightened and pointed at the first X on the drawing. "First trigger line goes here. Overhead snare. When he jumps or lunges? Line grabs his neck. Whiplash. Won't hold him forever, but it'll stun him."

He pointed at the second X. "Second line's lower. Ankle height. That one's for his leg if he pushes forward. Tangle the limbs. Take away the sprint."

He moved his boot to a third mark. "Then here's where I toss the first smoke charge. Citrus. Vinegar. Powder. Whole corridor turns into a gas chamber for his sinuses."

Rowan pictured Mojave, caught in wire, sneezing, eyes burning, nose on fire. They swallowed. "...He's gonna be *pissed*."

"That's the point," the man said. "Pissed animals make sloppy choices. While he's choking and thrashing, I'm above or behind the corner, up on a beam. Cable comes down from the ceiling, wraps the torso. That's the hard part. Getting him tied tight."

"And me?" Rowan asked.

"You're at the far end of the hall," he said. "Your job is simple." He pointed at them. "You don't run. You don't hesitate. You don't talk. As soon as he's held long enough that his head

stops blurring, ” he mimed taking aim, “you put a round through his skull. Or his chest. Or whatever you got a clean shot at.”

He nodded at the shotgun in their hands. “You’ve used that thing. I can see it. You don’t flinch like folks who haven’t.”

Rowan’s throat tightened. “..*Yeah*,” they said quietly. “I’ve used it.”

“Good,” he said. “Then you know.. you get one good shot before chaos. You miss, you hesitate, you aim pretty instead of practical... we’re dead.”

Rowan looked away, jaw clenching. “And if he breaks free before that?” they asked.

“Then we go to hell,” the man said matter-of-factly. “But at least we go knowing we didn’t die hiding.”

Rowan bit the inside of their cheek, thinking.

The man leaned back against the table, arms folded now, the shape of his plan laid out in the room around them, cables, bombs, muzzle, traps, and all. Years of fear condensed into strategy.

“It’s not perfect,” he admitted. “No such thing as a perfect trap. But I’ve seen big cats taken with less.”

“That’s not a cat,” Rowan said quietly. “You know that, right?”

His eyes hardened. “I know exactly what it is. That’s why I’m gonna treat it like every other apex predator that forgets it can bleed.”

Silence settled heavy for a moment.

Rowan looked at the snares again. The muzzle. The chalk. “You really think this will work?” they asked.

He considered. “I think it’ll give us a chance.”

Rowan’s grip tightened on their shotgun. Antlers throbbed, a reminder of what happened last time they trusted someone with a plan.

“...And what if I decide not to help?” Rowan asked, voice flat.

He met their gaze without flinching. “Then you walk away,” he said. “I can’t make you stay.” A beat. “But if you walk back out there and that orange bastard finds you alone... you’re going to wish you’d listened.”

Rowan swallowed, staring at him.

He was human.

He was familiar.

He was dangerous in a completely different way than Mojave.

They could shoot him now.

Walk out.

Go back. Say the job's done.

But the words Mojave threw at them earlier still clung,

If it really were just about the battery... you'd have ran already.

Rowan exhaled slowly through their nose.

"Let me get this straight," they said. "You're gonna string him up like a mountain lion, mace him with salad bomb gas, choke him with wire, slap a muzzle on him, and then I'm supposed to shoot him like a deer in a lane."

The man's mouth twitched. "...Pretty much."

Rowan stared at the floor for a second.

Then lifted their head.

"...You're insane," they said.

"So are you," he replied calmly.

...

Rowan's eyes flicked to the chalk lines again.

...

"Show me where you want me standing.."

And then,

They worked in silence.

Setting up the traps wasn't hard, it was mechanical, repetitive, almost soothing in the way washing dishes is soothing after your entire life collapses. Rowan threaded cables through eyehooks bolted into the decrepit walls. The man tied snare loops, his movements practiced, worn, like he'd done this a thousand times in his head and five hundred times in this hallway. Together they hammered the final anchor into a ceiling beam, the metallic chunk echoing down the empty corridors.

Rowan's antlers knocked the beam once, pain spiked hard enough to make them bite their tongue, but they steadied themselves, breathing through it.

With every cable tightened, every trigger line secured, every citrus bomb placed behind a piece of debris, Rowan's stomach twisted a little more.

This should've felt like justice.

It didn't.

It felt like *betrayal*.

Like something raw peeling away from the inside of their ribs.

As they mounted the last snare, Rowan's hands trembled, not from pain, not from fear of Mojave, but from something uglier.

Regret.

What the hell is wrong with me, they thought, twisting wire through a loop. *Why am I feeling this? Why now?*

Mojave had drowned them.

Manipulated them.

Laughed at them.

Shoved them into horrors and called it "*learning*."

They should want this. They should crave this. They should be relishing the idea of Mojave caught, choking, blinded, confused, just long enough for Rowan to shoot him.

But every time Rowan pictured it, Mojave's body jerking against cable restraints, his claws scraping concrete, his breath choked by the muzzle, his pupils blown wide in pain and betrayal, Rowan felt like their lungs were being crushed under their own ribs.

It made no sense.

It made perfect, horrifying sense.

Somewhere between Mojave's violence and his twisted affection, between the drowning and the way he steadied Rowan in the butcher room, between the brutality and the rare moments he said things like "*You won't be like this forever*," Rowan had gotten tangled.

Not safe.

Not protected.

But seen.

And Rowan hated that.

Hated him.

Hated themselves for hating this plan more than anything Mojave had ever done to them.

By the time they finished the final anchor point, Rowan's breath was tight. Their skin felt too thin. Their chest felt like something was crawling under it. They pulled back, hands still clutching cable, and forced themselves to breathe normally.

It didn't help.

The guilt felt like rot.

The man stood a few paces away, surveying the corridor like a general looking over a battlefield. Everything was mapped. Every trap in place. Every cable taut.

He nodded once. "Looks good," he said. "Better than good. If that damn cat sets foot in this hallway, he's done."

Rowan didn't respond.

They stared at the snares. The bombs. The muzzle waiting on a crate. They imagined Mojave's face behind the metal. Imagined his eyes. Imagined him calling them by name, mocking or angry or hurt, it didn't matter.

It all felt wrong.

"Kid?"

Rowan blinked hard and looked up.

The man was watching them now, brow furrowed. "You alright?" he asked.

Rowan swallowed. Their mouth tasted metallic. "Yeah," they whispered. "Fine." The lie was so thin it practically tore in the air.

The man studied them a second longer, then nodded once, accepting the lie or letting it slide because he didn't care. He stepped back, gesturing down the corridor where their trap sprawled like a mechanical spiderweb waiting for prey.

"Well," he said, wiping his palms on his jeans. "That's everything."

Rowan's stomach flipped.

"This'll work," he went on. "One way or another, tonight's the last night that monster walks around here."

Rowan's grip tightened on their shotgun.

Their breath hitched.

And the man asked the one question that made Rowan's chest cave in on itself,

"...You ready to do this?"

Rowan didn't answer.

Because their mouth couldn't form words.

Their heart couldn't pick a side.

Their brain couldn't decide whether to run toward the man's plan or run back through the desert screaming at Mojave to get out, move, anything.

Their throat flexed. Their jaw clenched.

And in their silence,

Rowan realized the truth. They weren't afraid of the plan failing.

They were afraid of it *working*.

Rowan didn't answer.

They didn't need to.

The man saw something shift in Rowan's eyes, something small, something flickering, but something that looked like consent. Or resignation. Or the hollow, exhausted agreement of someone who simply didn't have the energy to argue with fate anymore.

He nodded. "Alright," he said quietly. "Let's do this." He turned toward the hallway, toward the cable traps, the tripwires, the citrus grenades, the muzzle waiting like a metal promise, and Rowan followed.

Their feet felt heavy. Their limbs felt wrong. Part of Rowan's brain, the old part, the human part, was screaming at them to turn back, to run, to do anything else.

But the new part?

The part Mojave carved, sharpened, soaked in blood and made unrecognizable?

That part kept walking. Because there was no clean ending left.

No exits.

No undoing any of this.

Rowan and the man moved like they'd rehearsed this in their sleep.

Maybe the man had.

Maybe that was the only thing keeping him upright anymore. They ghosted through the lab's narrow halls, stepping over paper and broken chair legs, slipping past the gore-stained elevator like it was just another ugly piece of furniture. The man's jaw was locked so tight Rowan could see the muscle twitching. He kept glancing toward the back entrance, toward the cracked doors that breathed cold desert air into the building.

Rowan crouched behind a stack of toppled filing cabinets and a collapsed shelf, half-hidden in shadow. The antlers made everything harder, every movement tugged their scalp, every breath felt like it vibrated through bone. They kept swallowing back the ache like it was something they could bully into silence.

The man gave Rowan a final look.

Not friendly. Not trusting.

Just... need.

The man continued, voice low,

“I’ll trigger the lure.”

He crouched, reached into a crate, and clicked on the high-pitched distress beacon. The sound it emitted was sharp and desperate, echoing out into the desert like a wounded animal crying for help.

Rowan’s hands tightened around their shotgun.

The man whispered, “Every predator within five miles will hear that.”

Rowan’s heart pounded in their throat.

Every predator.

Including..

Especially.

They sank deeper behind the crates, breath shallow, body trembling but not with fear, not exactly, but with something uglier. Something they didn’t want to examine too closely.

The beacon sound was vicious. Thin and frantic. It clawed at the air and didn’t let go, like an animal dying slow. It echoed down the halls, bounced off the checkered floors, turned the lab into a throat screaming for help.

Rowan flinched despite themselves. “*Christ*,” they muttered under their breath. “That’s... evil.”

The man didn’t smile.

“Good,” he murmured. “He’ll come.”

They waited.

Minutes passed.

Then more.

The desert stayed quiet.

The man adjusted his grip on his shotgun, eyes narrowed, posture rigid.

Rowan could feel the tension radiating off him, years of being hunted, of losing everyone, of finally having a chance to strike back. It wasn't bravery.

It was desperation.

The beacon kept screaming.

Rowan's breathing was loud inside their own head. Their antlers pulsed. Their fingers hovered too close to the shotgun stock, grip adjusting, readjusting, like if they held it perfectly, their hands would stop feeling like strangers.

Then..

A sound beneath the beacon's shriek.

Soft.

A scuff.

Sand.

Something dragging across the threshold outside.

The man's whole body went still. His eyes sharpened like a knife.

Rowan held their breath.

Footsteps.

Light ones. Careful ones.

Not coyote.

Not human.

Rowan's stomach went cold with recognition.

Mojave.

Rowan's breath caught.

He's here...

The man slowly gestured, *Stay still.*

Rowan didn't move.

The footsteps stopped just outside the doorway.

Rowan felt the pressure of a familiar presence, like a hand settling on the back of their neck. A gravity that always preceded his voice.

The air almost seemed to thicken.

The man leaned slightly, straining to hear, eyes trained on the entrance.

Rowan did the same, heart hammering so hard it made their antlers throb. They waited for the sound of the trap.

For the *snap*.

The cable whip.

The yowl.

The moment the plan finally caught something.

And then..

TWANG.

Metal snapped tight.

Something hit the floor hard and scrambled, claws skittering frantically on tile.

A wild, panicked sound tore through the hallway.

The man's face lit with immediate, vicious relief.

"Got you," he breathed.

He surged forward before Rowan could even blink, gas canister in one hand, cable restraint buckled on their hip, shotgun in the other hand, turning the corner fast like the rage had been living in his legs for months and finally got permission to run.

Rowan rose from their crouch instinctively, moving just enough to see. And what they saw made their brain stutter. And their heart slammed into their ribs.

It *wasn't* Mojave in the trap.

It was a *bobcat*.

A small one. Terrified. Leg caught in steel. Body writhing, screeching, eyes wide and wet with pain. It twisted and thrashed, snarling, trying to tear itself free from metal biting into flesh.

The man froze mid-step, body short-circuiting, holding the shotgun pointed at the bobcat caught in the trap.

“...*What.*”

Rowan’s chest tightened.

The bobcat screamed again.

And in that exact moment..

A shadow moved behind the man. A shape slid through the doorway like liquid. Too tall. Too quiet. Too.. feline.

Mojave didn’t rush.

He didn’t need to.

He simply appeared, orange fur barely visible in the dim, ears forward, pupils narrow and gleaming with something smug and cold.

He looked at the trapped bobcat.

Then at the man.

Then,

Mojave’s mouth curled.

Not a smile. A grimace pretending to be one. Like he was amused and offended at the same time. Like he’d just watched someone try to pick his pocket and found it adorable.

The man barely noticed him by the corner of his eye. But when he did..

His blood turned to ice.

“Y..You—” the man spat, breath ragged. “You clever *SON OF A—*”

Then Mojave lunged.

The man barely had time to swear.

Mojave hit him like a car crash, claws hooking fabric, shoulder slamming into his chest, driving him back into the hallway wall hard enough the frame rattled. The beacon screeched on, shrill and useless, like it was panicking too.

The man fought like he’d been starving for this. He didn’t scream. Didn’t freeze. He shoved, twisted, drove an elbow up into Mojave’s ribs.

Mojave snarled, more irritation than pain, and raked claws across the man’s jacket, ripping leather like paper.

Rowan stood frozen in the shadows, watching the fight unfold like a nightmare.

The man grunted, jammed his forearm up under Mojave's throat to force distance, Then Mojave's claws snapped out and caught his arm, yanking him off balance. Mojave's eyes flashed. His tail stump lashed once, sharp and furious.

"You brought..." Mojave rasped, voice low and venomous, "...a *toy*?"

Rowan's stomach dropped at the sound of Mojave's voice in this place, inside these walls, under this light. It felt wrong. Like the lab recognized him. Like it remembered him.

The man's face contorted with effort. "You s-sick fuck!"

Mojave's ears twitched.

His head tilted slightly, like he was listening to a joke he already knew the punchline to.

Then the man did something smart.

He shoved Mojave back just enough to create space, ripped the canister's pin, and smashed it against the floor.

The gas burst out in a thick, stinging cloud, sharp and acidic, eye-watering. It was just wrong in the lungs.

Mojave hissed instantly, recoiling, swiping blindly as the irritant hit his face. His eyes squeezed shut, shoulders hunching, coughing hard, a rough, furious sound like his body was insulted by the air itself.

"FUCK—" Mojave choked, voice shredded. "You—*filthy*—"

The man didn't wait.

He yanked Mojave backward, shoving him toward the second restraint line,

And Mojave hit the trigger plate.

TWANG.

The second trap snapped.

Cables whipped up and caught Mojave around the torso, tightening enough to throw his balance off and slam him into the wall.

Mojave roared, angry now, turning and fighting the restraint like it was beneath him, like he could simply decide physics didn't apply.

The man moved behind him.

Fast.

A hunter with shaking hands and a furious heart.

He got the muzzle up,

Mojave thrashed.

It wasn't a neat struggle. It was like trying to saddle a hurricane.

Mojave bucked, slammed his head back, shoulder-checking the man hard enough to make him grunt and stagger, but the man clung on, wrestling the muzzle straps into place, trying to force it over Mojave's jaws from behind.

Mojave's claws scraped the wall.

His body heaved.

He coughed again, eyes watering from the gas, rage splintering into something feral and violent.

Rowan finally snapped out of the freeze.

They moved, stumbling out of hiding, shotgun lifting as their feet hit the checkered floor.

The man screamed over the chaos, voice cracking with desperation,

“SHOOT HIM! *SHOOT HIM* NOW—HE'S HELD—DO IT!”

Rowan's arms lifted before their brain even caught up. The shotgun leveled itself at Mojave like it had a will of its own.

Mojave's head turned slowly, unnervingly slowly, despite the muzzle halfway on, despite the cables cutting into his ribs, despite the gas burning his eyes raw.

His gaze snapped to Rowan.

Pinned them.

Claimed them.

His pupils blew wide.

For a slivered heartbeat Rowan saw something flash across his face,

A flicker. A fracture of something jagged and exposed, then swallowed just as fast.

Betrayal? Shock? Amusement? Or something worse.. something Rowan didn't have a name for but felt in their teeth.

Then Mojave's mouth twisted into that half-smile, that irritated curl like Rowan had inconvenienced him personally. Even coughing, even choking, even bound, he somehow managed to look like he was the one indulging them.

Like he had been waiting for this moment.

Waiting for Rowan to finally show their hand.

Waiting to see what they'd do when forced to choose.

His stare hooked into Rowan's chest, slow and deliberate, sinking in deep like a thorn pushed under the nail.

And through the gas and strain and fury, he forced out a single word, low and ragged and horribly intimate,

“...***Do it.***”

Not a plea.

Not permission.

A *dare*.

A whisper wrapped in barbed wire.

Rowan's finger touched the trigger, and something in their brain snapped.

Not cleanly.

Not quietly.

It splintered.

Their pulse roared like thunder under their skin. Their vision jittered, doubling, tripling, Mojave's outline stuttering between monster, captor, salvation, nothing.

Their lungs dragged at the air like they were drowning on dry land.

Their thoughts broke into chaos..

Kill him.

Don't kill him.

He *deserves* it.

He'll kill *you* first.

You owe him *nothing*.

You owe him *everything*.

You *want* this.

You *don't*.

He made you a *monster*.

He kept you *alive*.

He *ruined* you.

He *remade* you.

He *hurt* you.

He *chose* you.

Shoot.

Run.

Stay.

Shoot.

Shoot.

SHOOT—

Their hands shook hard. Violent tremors that rattled the barrel and rattled their bones, rattled every lie they'd been telling themselves.

The man screamed again, voice shredding with panic,

“HURRY UP—*PULL* THE TRIGGER—WHAT ARE YOU *DOING?!*”

Rowan didn't answer.

Couldn't.

Their breath came in rapid, chopped fragments, each inhale sharp enough to cut. Their skull pounded. The antlers felt like they were burrowing deeper, twisting roots into their brain.

The shotgun barrel wavered in tiny tremors, barely visible, but enough for Rowan to feel how wrong this all was.

Enough for Mojave to see straight through them.

Mojave didn't blink.

Didn't flinch.

Didn't plead.

He held Rowan's gaze like he was holding their heart in his teeth. The muzzle straps stretched as he flexed, muscles rolling under fur, still fighting, still impossibly powerful even restrained and half-blind.

Do it, his eyes said.

Prove yourself.

Pick me.

Kill me.

Save me.

Choose *me*.

Finish what you started..

Be who I think you *are*.

Be who you are *now*.

Rowan swallowed hard, throat burning.

Their vision tunneled until there was nothing left in the world but Mojave.

Mojave gasping, straining, daring them. Mojave waiting.

Everything else dissolved.

The man's yelling. The bobcat screaming. The beacon's shrill mechanical agony. The flickering lights. The gas haze.

All of it vanished, sucked into some distant corner of reality..

Except him.

And Rowan,

finally..

squeezed the trigger.

The shotgun detonated like a thunderclap. The recoil rammed into Rowan's shoulder hard enough to bruise bone.

The echo cracked down the hallway like lightning,

And a scream tore the air open.

But it wasn't Mojave's.

It was the man's.

A raw, sharp, agonized cry as the shot slammed into his shoulder, spinning him sideways, blood erupting through torn fabric.

Rowan's breath collapsed in their chest.

Their stomach dropped.

Their world tilted and fell.

He staggered back instantly, muzzle slipping from his grip, one hand flying to the wound as blood soaked his jacket in a spreading bloom.

"FUCK—!"

His knees buckled for half a second as he fought not to drop.

And in that one moment,

That single slip,

Mojave ripped free.

The restraint lines snapped under the force of him.

The muzzle fell away completely.

Mojave sucked in air like a starving thing, his eyes blazing, his chest heaving, then turned his head toward Rowan again.

Rowan stood there, shotgun still raised, smoke curling from the barrel, hands still trembling,

Staring at the innocent man they just shot.

And the monster they *couldn't*.

they hadn't missed.

They'd *chosen*.

Rowan's ears were ringing.

The hallway was still vibrating from the shotgun blast.

Smoke curled lazily out of the barrel like it was mocking them for thinking they could ever pretend they were neutral in this war.

Mojave stood half-wreathed in what remained of the restraint line, fur bristled, pupils blown wide from fury and adrenaline. His breathing was uneven, still ragged from the gas, but he stood like a monolith anyway, chest rising slow and controlled, gaze locked on Rowan.

Everything else fell away.

Rowan's hands trembled around the shotgun.

They couldn't look away.

Something in their chest felt like it was cracking apart, clean and silent, like splitting ice.

Mojave's expression...

It wasn't triumphant.

Not yet.

It was quiet. Focused. Like he was studying them. Like they were the experiment, not the lab.

A thousand unspoken things hung between them,

You *chose* me.

You *shot* him.

You *didn't* run.

You *couldn't*.

Rowan wanted to say something.

Anything.

Nothing came out.

Then a wet furious groan cut between them.

"You..."

The man's voice was shredded with pain and disbelief.

"You were with the cat the *entire* fucking time??"

Rowan flinched like the words were a slap. They turned toward him, swallowing hard.

He was pressed against the wall, one hand clamped to his shoulder, blood darkening his jacket in a spreading stain. His face was twisted into pain and disbelief all piled together like he couldn't decide which one to lead with. His gaze kept darting between Rowan and Mojave like he was trying to solve the world's cruellest equation.

Rowan started, "I—I *didn't*—" They stopped.

Because even to their own ears, there was no version of the sentence that didn't sound like a lie.

"I—" Rowan stuttered, trembling.

They wanted to say I didn't *mean* to.

They wanted to say I *panicked*.

They wanted to say you don't *understand*.

They wanted to say I'm *sorry*.

But even Rowan knew it would sound stupid.

Because the truth was uglier and simpler, Rowan had aimed. Rowan had squeezed. Rowan had chosen.

The apology died in their mouth.

They wanted to pretend there was some moral angle they could stand on.

But there wasn't.

They chose.

And Mojave knew it.

Rowan's jaw tightened, pain blooming in their skull again as the antlers pulsed in time with their heartbeat. Their throat tightened with something ugly and tight and heavy.

Mojave watched all of it.

And he smiled.

A slow pleased curl of his lip, cruelly satisfied, soft at the edges. Like he was savoring a flavor he'd been waiting ages to taste.

He finally tore his gaze away from Rowan and turned toward the man, who was on his knees, hand pressed to his bleeding shoulder, breath coming in furious little snarls.

Mojave walked toward him, not rushed, not triumphant.

Just steady.

Rowan's breath shook.

The man spat blood and rage at Mojave's feet. "You fucking monster—"

"*Oh,*" Mojave purred, leaning down just enough that his shadow swallowed the man's face, "don't flatter me."

His voice was almost gentle.

Almost.

Then he tipped his head, tone softening in a way that made Rowan's skin crawl.

"After all..."

His gaze slid briefly back to Rowan again, slow and intentional.

"...if you're smart, you'd bond with your monster."

The man's eyes flashed. "Says the thing wearing a muzzle two seconds ago."

Mojave's mouth twitched. "Mm. Cute."

The man tried to lunge, but his knee buckled, pain cutting him down before he got anywhere.

"Stay down," Mojave chided, amused. "You're leaking."

The man bared his teeth. "*Fuck you.*"

"Mmh." Mojave shrugged almost politely. "No, thank *you.*"

Then he grabbed the man by the throat. The man spat, breath shaking. "You're not an animal."

Mojave tilted his head, like he'd been given a compliment. "That's what you hate most, isn't it?" he murmured. "You built a whole little story where you were the hunter. The last man. The *righteous* one. And I was just... a beast you could trap."

He paused, then continued,

"But you don't get to call yourself a hunter," Mojave said, voice dropping velvet-smooth, "when the only thing you've actually been killing is time."

The man's jaw tightened. "K..Kid—" he tried again, voice cracking with urgency. "Kid. *Listen* to me. He's—"

Mojave's hand snapped out and grabbed the man by the front of his jacket, yanking him forward off the wall like he weighed nothing. The man made a choked sound, more surprise than pain, boots scraping uselessly against tile.

Just claws digging in, lifting him effortlessly like he weighed nothing.

Rowan's grip tightened on the shotgun.

Their feet stayed planted. Their body did that horrible thing where it waited for permission to do the right thing and didn't get it.

Mojave leaned in close to the man's face, speaking like they were sharing a secret.

"I'm going to do you a favor..." Mojave murmured. "I'm going to end the part where you still think you were ever going to win."

The man's eyes burned. "You're *scared*," he spat, desperate. "You hate those masks because you're scared. You hate being reminded you can be hunted too—"

Mojave paused.

Not because he was struck.

Because he was amused.

A slow, almost tender inhale through his nose. Then Mojave smiled, absolutely joyless.

"*Oh*," he said. "Hunter.. I don't give a *rats ass* about your Voorhees pinterest decor."

The man blinked, confused for a fraction of a second like he'd expected denial.

Mojave's voice softened. "Here's the part you misunderstood." He tilted his head. "I'm not scared of being hunted." His eyes flicked to the hallway of masks beyond the room, those blank, staring faces.

"I'm irritated," he corrected. "Because it's *rude*."

Then his gaze returned to the man with chilling calm.

"And because it's a reminder... that men like you always think everything belongs to you the moment you name it. That somehow, in whatever fucked up part of your brain actually believes your life is any more special than mine. Because you wouldn't even BEGIN to endure the horrors I've survived."

The man tried to struggle, tried to lift his gun arm, tried to do anything, but Mojave's grip tightened once and the fight left his posture in a shudder.

Rowan watched, breathing shallow. Part of them screamed to stop it. Part of them stayed silent.

Mojave glanced over his shoulder at Rowan, eyes bright.

Not asking. Not checking.

Just... letting Rowan see.

Letting Rowan witness what the choice really meant.

Then Mojave looked back at the man.

“You were so sure you were the last,” he said quietly. “You built a shrine of masks and called it safety.” His voice dropped into something almost affectionate.

“But you weren’t the last.” He leaned closer, so close the man’s breath hit Mojave’s fur.

“You were just the *next*. ”

The man’s eyes widened. His lips parted, maybe to curse, maybe to beg, maybe to call Rowan’s name again.

He didn’t get the chance.

Then.. in one smooth, obscene motion..

Mojave braced one foot forward, tightened his grip, claws digging into the mans ribs,

And tore the man in half.

A wet, violent rip split the air along with the mans guttural screams, louder than the shotgun, louder than Rowan’s pulse screaming in their ears.

Viscera spilled.

Blood hit the checkered floor in wide arcs, splattering up Rowan’s boots, their jeans, their hands. Their dignity.

Rowan stumbled back, choking on their breath and nearly slipping on gore.

The left half of the man hit the ground with a slap. The right half sagged in Mojave’s hands before he tossed it aside like an empty meat wrapper.

Silence crashed down.

Thick.

Suffocating.

Rowan stood there, trembling so hard the shotgun rattled against their palms.

Their breath came in thin jerking pulls. Their vision tunneled in and out. Their ears rang. Their body felt like it wasn’t entirely theirs anymore, like the antlers had burrowed deeper, rewired something fundamental.

The man’s remains were still cooling on the tile.

Mojave exhaled once, and wiped one clawed thumb across his jaw to clear the worst of the blood.

Then he looked at Rowan again.

Not with anger.

Not gloating.

But with something far worse.

Recognition.

As if Rowan hadn't just betrayed someone.

As if Rowan had just proven something important.

As if Rowan had come *home*.

He stepped toward them once. Just one slow, heavy step, stepping over the man's remains like a shed coat.

Blood dripped from his claws onto the tiles. He wiped a smear of blood off his cheek with the back of his wrist, eyes never leaving Rowan.

And in a voice quiet enough to be intimate, dangerous enough to make the hallway feel too small, Mojave murmured,

"Our prey," Mojave said, "was getting a little too... *advantageous*, don't you think?"

Rowan flinched. Their grip tightened. Their jaw locked.

Mojave continued as if Rowan had nodded.

"When he saw you were human, it was clear as day he found something he'd been searching for as long as he could remember."

He clicked his tongue.

"Hope."

He stepped closer. The beacon still shrieked somewhere down the hallway, but Mojave's voice drowned it out entirely.

"You can't let something like that go unchecked," Mojave murmured. "Or it festers into ambition." He casually spoke. Like he was commenting on a stain. Like this was a lesson he'd taught a hundred times, and Rowan was just the newest idiot student.

Rowan tried to look away.

Mojave did not allow it.

Mojave's hand closed around their jaw, not brutal, not crushing, but certain. A grip that didn't need strength to be a threat because it carried ownership in the pressure alone. He angled

Rowan's face back toward him as if their eyes were property too.

"Because when humans become ambitious," Mojave said, leaning slightly, "they start to get a little too brave."

Rowan swallowed thickly. Their hands shook again.

"Best if you don't make that mistake."

The words sank into Rowan's spine like a needle.

Mojave's tone softened, not kind, but soft the way a knife is soft when it slips between ribs instead of breaking bone.

"Truth is," he said, "hope's just the longing for a better tomorrow..."

He paused, letting the sentence breathe.

"...but tomorrow *never* comes."

Rowan shut their eyes.

"And he.." Mojave gestured lazily at the bisected corpse "...was lucky to die believing it."

Rowan's stomach lurched. A shudder ripped through them.

"But," Mojave added, shrugging lightly, "in those final seconds? I think he realized the truth."

His eyes glinted.

"He *screamed* like he knew."

Rowan's throat closed. Their heartbeat drummed in their ears, uneven and wet, like something trying to escape.

Mojave tilted his head slightly, studying Rowan's trembling. "You're shaking."

And then, like a dam failing all at once, something collapsed inside them.

They fell apart.

The shotgun slipped from their hands and clattered across the tile, spinning once before stopping. Rowan didn't even flinch at the noise.

"Stop," Rowan whispered, voice already torn. "*Just—stop.*"

Mojave blinked, almost faintly annoyed, like Rowan's reaction was exaggerated.

Rowan stared at the corpse. Stared at what was left of a man who had spoken to them like they were real, like they weren't a weapon, like they weren't already half-ruined.

“I...” Rowan swallowed air like it hurt. “I *killed* him.”

The words didn’t sound like they belonged to them. Like someone else had said it through their mouth.

Their voice cracked, shattered, then rose again, louder, uglier. “I fucking *killed* him. An *innocent* man—he—he was HUMAN—he was— like *me*—”

Mojave’s expression flickered, something sharp sliding behind his eyes. “*Rowan*—”

“No!” Rowan snapped, voice breaking. “Don’t— don’t say my name like— like any of this is okay!” Their hands clawed at their own hair before the antlers made them flinch away in pain again.

Rowan shook their head violently, like they could dislodge the memory, like they could shake out the last ten minutes like water from fur.

“He was like me,” Rowan whispered, horrified. “He was—he had a *face*, he had a *voice*, he had—he had *fear* and.. he was trying to *help* me.. he—He was—he *trusted* me. And I—I *chose* you.”

Rowan’s breath collapsed into a sob that felt more like choking.

“I *chose* you,” Rowan said again, voice breaking on every syllable. “I. *chose*. you.”

Mojave’s ears flicked back.

Offended.

As if Rowan had insulted him, not confessed to a crime.

“You didn’t ‘*choose* me,’” Mojave said coldly, every word clipped and clean. “You made the correct decision.”

Rowan let out a hysterical ruined laugh, wet and choking, barely even a laugh.

“Correct?” Rowan snapped, fury bursting through the grief like a flare. “I shot him. I blew a *hole* in his shoulder—I watched you—” Their voice broke. Their eyes flicked again to the body. “I watched you *tear* him apart—I—I let you—I’m—and.. and I.. I did nothing. I *helped* you.” Their voice dropped into a whisper like a confession dragged out of their ribs.

“I’m no better than Atticus *now*. ”

That struck Mojave like a slap.

Mojave’s whole posture changed. Something in him snapped sharp and ugly.

His pupils narrowed.

His jaw tightened.

His voice dropped low enough to vibrate in Rowan's ribs.

"Do not," he hissed, "compare yourself to that *filth*."

Rowan shook their head, tears streaking through the grime. "Why? Because I killed someone innocent to protect you? Because I let someone manipulate me into thinking violence is the only option? Because I don't even know who the fuck I am *anymore*?"

Mojave's lip curled. Disgust and pride mixed together in a way that made Rowan feel sick. "You did *nothing* wrong," he said, with cold certainty.

"YES I DID!" Rowan screamed.

The sound ricocheted down the corridor, swallowed and returned by the lab. The beacon's shriek almost seemed quieter under Rowan's voice.

"He was a person," Rowan spat, tears pouring, anger making their chest hurt. "A *real* person. With a life. With memories. With a mind that wasn't built around violence and *fucking* blood ____"

Rowan's breath shattered again.

"I could've left," Rowan whispered, the words turning into poison in their throat. "I could've *run*. I could've ended *all* of this. I could've *k-killed* myself. I could've gotten away from *you*.."

Something flickered across Mojave's face.

Not guilt.

Not remorse.

Something closer to irritation... with a razor-thin edge of something that looked like *hurt* before it could be named. He stepped back half a pace like Rowan had gotten too close to something he didn't want touched.

Then, softly, almost mockingly,

"So you would've shot *me* instead?"

...

"Is that what you wanted, Rowan?"

Rowan froze.

The air went hollow.

Rowan's mouth opened.

Nothing came out.

Not a yes.

Not a no.

Not even a breath.

And that silence told Mojave everything.

He scoffed sharply, bitter and disgusted, turning his face away like he couldn't stand to look at Rowan while they were honest. Like he thought this final hunt would've.. opened something in them. But realized it never would.

"*Pathetic*," he muttered, though it wasn't clear if he meant Rowan's guilt, or Rowan's hesitation, or the fact that Rowan still had the nerve to pretend they were anything but his.

Then, colder, businesslike, like Mojave remembered this was all a transaction,

"Grab him and get out of here."

Rowan flinched.

Mojave then sneezed, still half affected by the smoke bomb, head shaking like an irritated cat.

"This place gives me the creeps." His ears angled back, as if the building itself irritated him. He sneezed again, covering his face, "No need to.. prepare this one."

Rowan stared, disbelieving.

"Just drop him into the basement. And I'll give you your *precious* battery." Mojave said bitterly.

Rowan's stomach turned so hard they thought they might vomit. Their throat burned. Their hands, those traitor hands, shook as they reached for the torn pieces.

The weight was worse than they expected.

Not physically.

Morally.

Each piece felt like proof. Like a receipt.

Rowan's arms trembled as they lifted him, blood slicking their sleeves again, soaking into them like it wanted to stain deeper than skin.

Mojave grabbed the shotgun from the ground and walked ahead toward the exit like none of this mattered, like this was simply cleanup after a successful hunt. Like this was... how Rowan thought.. *temporary*.

As Rowan staggered after him, carrying what was left, Mojave spoke without looking back.

It wasn't comfort.

It wasn't kindness.

It was something twisted into the shape of affection, then sharpened.

"You chose correctly," he murmured. "Even if you don't understand that yet."

Rowan's eyes squeezed shut as fresh tears spilled.

Mojave glanced sideways just once, pupils narrowed in a way that made the look feel like a hook.

"And I *won't* forget what you did tonight."

It wasn't praise.

It wasn't comfort or reassurance.

It was a threat.

A claim stamped into the moment. A brand pressed into Rowan's ribs.

Rowan might've saved Mojave tonight. That, Mojave approved. But the fact that even for a split second Rowan considered killing Mojave at all? That was something he *couldn't* overlook. Not tonight.

And as Rowan carried the dead man out of the Ouroburos Lab, the beacon still screaming behind them, they realized with a sick sinking certainty,

No matter how hard they shook...

That choice was going to follow them forever.

Chapter End Notes

You guys ready the Malepreg chapter next where Rowan gives birth to Mojave's kittens?

∠(◡ ◡ ∠) _

Chapter 22: Hold Still

Chapter Summary

Rowan gives birth to Kittens. Nah im jk. They're still getting a divorce

Chapter Notes

Just a quick reminder for everyone reading this fic, please don't promote fics supporting rape and sexual violence in the comments. I want this space to stay respectful to the original creators of Cat Named Mojave and to the tone of this fic, which focuses on psychological horror and survival, not sexual violence.

And please don't reference me or this work to inspire other Cat Named Mojave fanfics IF the work involves sexual violence. I wanna see more fan content of the game, just not with those aspects. I can't control what others write, just please don't involve me or my writing with that content.

Thanks for understanding and for being such an incredible supportive audience. I love you guys ❤️

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Rowan followed Mojave all the way back like a ghost with weight.

The desert air still had that winter bite, thin and sharp, scraping at every exposed nerve. It got into the places Atticus had stitched and drilled and claimed. Every step made their skull pulse like a warning light, and the antlers.. those stupid, obscene branches caught stray wind and turned it into pain.

Mojave didn't look back.

Of course he didn't.

He walked ahead with the shotgun slung easy, posture loose, like he hadn't just ripped the last human in the junkyard into a final lesson. Like this was what the night had always been for.

Rowan stumbled after him with the remains dragging their arms down, blood slicking their sleeves, soaking deeper until it stopped feeling wet and started feeling permanent. Their throat kept trying to close every time their brain dared to whisper.. *You could've left. You could've shot him. You **didn't**.*

And the worst part?

They weren't sure if the choice disgusted them... or if it had already started to feel inevitable.

By the time Mojave's house came into view, Rowan's legs were shaking in that quiet delayed way. No longer fear. No longer the adrenaline that rose. Instead, it fell.

The crash.

Mojave stepped up onto the porch, pushed the door open, and vanished inside like the house simply swallowed him.

Rowan didn't get swallowed. Rowan had to do the ugly part. They veered toward the outside basement door, the one that always looked like it led to something that shouldn't exist, and yanked it open.

Cold air burped up from the dark.

Rowan stared down into it, swaying. The smell hit like damp concrete and rust, with the faint metallic sweetness of old blood that never really leaves places like that. Like the basement had a memory.

Their fingers tightened.

They lowered the remains in, not gently, not brutal either, just... done. Like placing down something heavy they'd carried too long.

It thudded.

Rowan stood there for a second with their hands hovering, waiting for... what? A voice? A conscience? A lightning bolt?

Nothing came.

Just the desert wind and their own breathing.

Rowan shut the basement door, and the sound of it closing felt like punctuation. Like the night got filed away, stamped and locked.

Then they went inside.

The house was dim. The kind of dim that made shadows look like they had opinions.

Rowan's boots tracked dirt and dried blood across the floor. Their head pulsed. Their vision swam a little whenever they turned too fast. Every time they swallowed, they tasted iron, like the lab never fully left their mouth.

In the kitchen, the counters were a mess in that familiar Mojave way, half blood, half carcasses, like someone had started a domestic life and then got bored and decided to stab it.

No strobe lights. No rave music. Just the hum of the fridge and the silence that felt like punishment.

Rowan stood there, staring at the table like it might tell them what they were supposed to feel. They tried to inventory their sins the way Mojave inventoried bodies.

Jane. John. The kid. Hieronymus. The cult. Atticus. The man in the lab. They didn't even know his name.

All of it stacked up in their chest, heavy and sour, and still.. STILL.. Rowan's brain tried to reduce it to a single stupid sentence because that was easier than screaming.

It's for the battery.

Like saying it enough times could make it true. Like saying it enough times could make it worth it.

A soft sound came from behind them.

Footsteps.

Mojave reappeared in the doorway, quiet as a thought, carrying something heavy in both hands.

Rowan looked up.

And there it was.

A *real* car battery.

Not a metaphor. Not a lie. Not a "*lesson*." Not a present box full of feces. An actual dusty grease-smudged battery with corroded terminals and a weight that looked too normal to belong in their story.

Rowan's body went still.

Their brain stalled.

They stared at it like it was a joke with no punchline.

Mojave set it down on the counter with a dull thunk.

The sound felt loud.

Final.

Rowan's throat tightened, but it wasn't relief that rose up. It was... emptiness with teeth. Because this was it.

This was the object they'd bled for. The thing they'd used to justify every step deeper into the dark. The thing they'd clung to like a rosary made of lies.

And now it was just... sitting there.

Rowan stared at it until their eyes stung.

Mojave leaned back against the counter, hands on his hips, shoulders tense in a way that looked almost human. Almost tired. His gaze stayed on Rowan, but not in the usual predatory appraisal.

More like he was measuring the distance between what he wanted and what he got.

His voice came out low and bitter.

“Could’ve been so different,” he said.

Rowan didn’t answer.

Mojave’s jaw ticked once. “If you were honest for once in your *damn* life.”

Rowan’s hands curled into fists at their sides. “I *was* honest.”

Mojave’s eyes narrowed. “No.” He nodded at the battery like it offended him. “Someone who did all this for that would look... *relieved*.”

Rowan paused, and went silent again. Because what were they supposed to say? Sorry I saved you? Sorry I didn’t want to shoot you? Sorry I’m not as simple as you demand me to be?

They just stared at the battery like it was some cruel joke.

Mojave’s voice softened, not kind, just... quieter. More dangerous for it. “So.” He tilted his head.

“*Leave*.”

Rowan swallowed. Their antlers throbbed, like their body flinched before their mind could.

They didn’t move.

The kitchen light hummed overhead. The battery sat there like an insult or a horrible reminder, somehow smaller than everything Rowan had done to reach it.

Rowan’s throat worked once. “...Just like that?” they rasped.

Mojave’s ears twitched. His eyes stayed on the battery for a beat longer, then slid back to Rowan with a slow, cutting focus.

“Just like that,” he said.

Rowan let out a laugh that didn’t have humor in it. “After everything—”

“After *everything*,” Mojave cut in, sharp. “Exactly.”

He stepped closer, paws quiet on tile, tail stump still, the posture he wore when he wasn't performing. When he meant what he said and didn't care if it landed like a blade. "You want me to pretend you're reliable?" Mojave asked. "That I can build anything on you?"

Rowan's jaw tightened. "I came back."

"And you considered *shooting* me," Mojave said, calm as ice.

Rowan flinched.

Mojave watched it happen like he'd been waiting for it. "You stand there like you deserve points for returning," he continued. "As if it cancels out the fact that when it mattered.. when the moment demanded instinct.. your hands shook."

Rowan's fists clenched harder. "I didn't—"

"You did," Mojave said. "And don't insult me by lying about it." He gestured once, small and dismissive, toward the door.

"What I *need*," he said, "is not someone who listens when it's *convenient*. I don't need someone who hears 'move' and asks *why*. I don't need someone who hears 'run' and stops to debate morality."

His gaze narrowed, pupils thinning. "I need someone who understands my direction is not a suggestion."

Rowan stared at him, their breath tight and heart shaking through their ribs. "So what, you want a dog?"

Mojave's mouth twitched. Not a smile.

"A dog obeys out of reward," he murmured. "And prizes are flimsy. Its a means to an end. It runs to the next person with a biscuit. It bites the wrong person when it panics." He leaned in just slightly, voice dropping even lower, dangerously personal,

"I need someone who obeys because it doesn't occur to them *not* to."

Rowan's stomach dropped.

Mojave lifted his hand, not touching, just hovering a claw near Rowan's face like he was tracing an invisible outline.

"When I tell someone to move, they *move*," he said. "But what I need is someone who doesn't just move. Someone who anticipates. Someone who hears me and their first thought isn't 'how do I get out of this,' it's 'how do I make this *cleaner*?'"

His eyes flicked to Rowan's antlers.

"To make it *count*."

Rowan's mouth went dry. Their head pulsed, sharp enough to make their vision swim.

Mojave's voice sharpened again. "You are always looking for a door," he said. "Always measuring exits. Always doing that quiet little math in your head like your life is still something you can bargain your way back into."

Rowan's lips parted, but nothing came out.

Mojave kept going.

"You second-guess everything I tell you because you keep pretending there's still a version of you that gets to walk away clean." His gaze was unwavering. "You keep lying to yourself that this is temporary. That it's just a phase. A bad dream."

Rowan's throat burned. "It was *supposed* to be temporary."

Mojave's ears angled back, offended but not loud about it, but expressive enough in a way that doesn't scream hurt. "And look what temporary bought you," he said, nodding toward the battery.

"A prize you can't even look happy about."

Rowan's eyes flicked back to it.

The battery.

The whole reason.

And still, nothing inside them lit up.

Mojave's voice lowered again, softer yet somehow worse. "You let Atticus's words get inside you," he said. "You let a smiling stranger plant doubt where I put certainty."

Rowan swallowed. "He—"

"He *tortured* you," Mojave snapped, sudden heat under the calm. "And you still listened."

Rowan's hands trembled at their sides.

Mojave took one more step forward until Rowan could smell him, the constant thread of iron that never left him. "You almost let a stranger *kill* me," Mojave said quietly, like he was stating a law of nature. "You stood there with a gun in your hands, and for a heartbeat you entertained the idea."

Rowan's breath hitched.

Mojave's eyes narrowed to slits.

"So tell me," he murmured. "How am I supposed to rely on your instincts? Your loyalty?" His voice dipped. "How am I supposed to sleep knowing you might... reconsider... next

time?”

Rowan’s jaw clenched so tight it ached.

“I *saved* you...” Rowan forced out.

Mojave’s gaze didn’t soften.

“And how many people had to die before you did?” he asked. “How many mistakes did you have to make first? How much blood had to spill before you finally chose correctly?”

Rowan’s chest rose and fell too fast. The antlers throbbed like they were punishing them for breathing.

Mojave leaned slightly closer, cruelly calm again.

“How many *more* people are going to die,” he whispered, “before you accept the one thing you *keep* resisting?”

Rowan didn’t answer.

Mojave’s eyes glinted.

“That I’m the most honest thing you’ve ever had,” he said. “I’ve never pretended to be kind. I’ve never dressed it up. I’ve never lied to you with a smile and called it ‘*help*.’”

His gaze flicked down to the battery again, then back up.

“And you still look like you’re waiting for permission to leave.”

Rowan’s throat tightened, shame bubbling like acid.

Mojave held the silence like a weapon.

Then again, like a verdict,

“*Leave.*”

Rowan didn’t move.

The battery sat there between them, a dull metal that lost its meaning, catching the kitchen light like an answer no one actually wanted.

Seconds dragged.

Mojave shifted again, irritation creeping back in. “Take it,” he said again. “Or don’t. *I don’t* —”

“I can’t.”

The words came out quietly. Not dramatic. Not arguing. Not defensive. Just... there.

Mojave froze.

His expression sharpened instantly. “Excuse me?”

Rowan’s laugh came out dry and ugly. “I *can’t* leave. Not like this.”

They gestured vaguely at their head, careful not to touch it, like even the air near the antlers could burn. Cause.. it does.

“I need your help getting them off.”

The silence that followed was immediate.

Mojave didn’t blink for a moment. Then he scoffed, looking away like Rowan had just said something embarrassing.

“You could go to a vet,” he said flatly. “Or a doctor. That’s what people do.”

Rowan stared at him like he’d grown a second head. Then they dryly laughed, devoid of of all humor and amusement. “Yeah. Sure...” Their voice dripped with exhaustion and disbelief. “Let me just.. stroll into a hospital with..what? Murder charges and deer hardware drilled into my skull?”

They tipped their head slightly, grimacing as pain shot bright behind their eyes. “Nothing suspicious there at all. Totally normal Tuesday.”

Mojave’s ears twitched. His eyes flicked back to Rowan.

“Do it yourself.”

Rowan’s jaw tightened. “I probably could.”

Mojave’s expression said *then why are you still talking?*

Rowan forced the words out anyway. “But I don’t know how without blacking out. Or bleeding out. Or... ruining whatever’s still intact in my head. And...” Their voice cracked the tiniest bit at the end, and it pissed them off that it did.

“And I don’t want to be alone when it happens...”

Mojave’s gaze held Rowan’s for a long second, unreadable. Then he exhaled sharply, like he was annoyed at the concept of feelings existing at all.

“This wasn’t part of the deal,” he said.

Rowan’s stomach sank. “*Mojave—*”

“You agreed,” he cut in, voice sharp. “Battery. Then you go.” He nodded once, precise. “That’s what you wanted. That’s what you’ve been clinging to.”

Rowan swallowed hard. Their hands trembled slightly. "I'm not asking you to keep me," Rowan said. "I'm not asking to stay forever. I'm just—" They paced slightly. "This was your mess too. You know more about bodies than anyone I've ever met. And whether you like it or not... you're the only one I trust not to butcher me."

Mojave let out a short incredulous laugh. "That's a low bar."

"And yet," Rowan murmured, "here we are."

...

Mojave stepped closer, eyes colder now. "I don't help people who are already *halfway* out the door."

Rowan stared.

They tried to say something clever. Something sharp. Something that didn't make them look weak.

Nothing came, instead their head pulsed. Their stomach rolled.

And then, betraying them completely, Rowan made that sound.

A small pained exhausted whine that wasn't even a word. Just a raw noise scraped out of their throat like their body had given up pretending it had pride.

It was pathetic.

Rowan hated it.

Mojave's ears flicked, like the smallest reaction got under his skin exactly the way Rowan knew it would.

Rowan's voice came next, desperate and ugly. "*Please.*"

Mojave stared at them, pupils tight, jaw clenched like he was fighting the urge to enjoy it.

Rowan's chest hitched. "Please," they said again, louder now, shaking, furious at themselves for needing anyone, him, for anything. "I can't—I can't do this alone. *I can't.*"

Mojave's gaze dragged up to the antlers again.

Then to their ear where the tag used to be. Then down to Rowan's hands, still stained no matter how much they washed.

He was quiet a long time.

Then something shifted in Mojave's face. The kind of expression a narcissist gets when someone finally breaks exactly the way they want. It stroked his ego in ways he wouldn't say out loud.

When he finally spoke, it wasn't soft nor gentle.

It was a reluctant give in.

"...Fine."

Rowan's breath caught like they'd been underwater.

Mojave leaned in just enough for his voice to hook into their ear. "But you don't get to beg me like that and pretend this meant nothing," he murmured. "You understand?"

Rowan's throat tightened. "I—"

Mojave's eyes narrowed. "Say you understand."

Rowan swallowed.

Their voice came out small. "*I understand.*"

Mojave straightened, satisfied in that exact, terrible way narcissists get when satisfied, because it wasn't the agreement that fed him.

It was the need.

"I should hate that you're doing this," Mojave said. "Dragging it out. Making excuses."

Rowan met his gaze. "Then why don't you?"

Mojave's tail stump flicked sharply. He looked away, just for a second. "...Because you're hurt," he said. "And because I don't like unfinished work. Waste.. waste is a *sin*."

Rowan exhaled, slow. Not relieved. Just... less braced for impact.

Mojave turned toward the cabinets, already moving like he'd made up his mind and the rest was just procedure.

"I'll help you remove them. Properly."

Rowan's shoulders sagged slightly. Not in triumph. In relief they didn't want to admit to.

"But," Mojave continued, eyes sharp again, "once it's done, you don't get to pretend this was mutual. You take the battery. You walk. And you don't come back looking for meaning where there isn't any."

Rowan nodded. "...Okay."

Mojave watched them for a long moment. Then he turned away again, already reaching for supplies.

"Don't pass out on me. I'll be very annoyed if you die halfway through."

Rowan nodded, glancing away.

Mojave didn't announce where they were going after he left the kitchen. He just grabbed the kit, jerked his chin toward the basement door, and started down the steps like this was just another chore that needed doing before nightfall.

Rowan followed.

Each step sent a dull throb through their skull, the antlers pulling ever so slightly with gravity, reminding them they were not meant to be there. The basement smelled like cold earth, Rancid in a hostile way, but honest. A place where things happened and didn't apologize for it.

All of Mojave's trophies were strung up on the corridor walls, with notes under them, detailing a brief memory of each kill.

Mojave cleared a worktable with one sweep of his arm. Metal clattered to the floor. Tools rattled.

"Sit," he said firmly.

Rowan climbed up and sat, legs dangling and hands already clenched in their lap. Their breathing was shallow before he even touched them.

Mojave snapped on gloves.

The sound alone made Rowan tense.

"I'm starting with the stitching," Mojave said, tone clinical. "If I don't loosen it first, you'll tear."

Rowan laughed weakly. "That's what she said."

Mojave glared.

...

"...sorry."

Mojave rolled his eyes, "Don't move," he warned.

Then the scissors touched their scalp. The first snip wasn't pain. It was anticipation.

The second, however...

Rowan gasped so hard it stole the air from their lungs.

Fire exploded along their skull, sharp and immediate, like someone dragging a blade dipped in salt through live nerve. Their hands flew up instinctively, fingers twitching uselessly before slamming back down against the table.

“Fuck—!” Rowan choked, back arching. “FUCK—”

“Hold still,” Mojave snapped, grip tightening at their shoulders. “You move, I slip.”

“I’m *trying*,” Rowan panted, sweat already breaking across their forehead. “Jesus—*oh my god—*”

Another *snip*.

Another wave of agony, worse this time. The stitches had been pulled tight, drilled deep, the skin never meant to heal around foreign bone. Every cut felt like the antlers were screaming their way deeper before letting go.

Rowan shook, breath stuttering, jaw clenched so hard their teeth hurt.

Mojave paused. “You need to breathe.”

“I am breathing!” Rowan hissed. “It just.. f-feels like my head’s on *fire*.”

“That means you’re awake,” Mojave said dryly. “Which I need.”

He resumed.

Snip.

Tug.

Release.

Rowan cried out this time, a raw sound ripped straight from their chest, hands scrabbling for purchase on the table edge. Their vision swam. Black spots crept in at the edges.

“I can’t— *I can’t—*” they gasped. “I feel it inside my head—”

“I know,” Mojave said, quieter now. “That’s where it is, dumbass.”

He worked carefully, undoing Atticus’s work stitch by stitch. Blood welled, warm and slick, tracking down Rowan’s temple. Mojave wiped it away absently, focused.

Rowan’s entire body was trembling now.

Sweat soaked their shirt. Their breathing turned ragged and broken, every inhale sharp and shallow like their lungs refused to cooperate anymore.

“We haven’t even—” Rowan choked on a laugh that sounded dangerously close to a pained sob choking on air. “You haven’t even *pulled* it out yet.”

Mojave stopped again.

Then stared at Rowan.

Then deadass went,

"That's what she said..."

Rowan blinked, staring at Mojave before letting out a weak wheeze. Mojave begrudgingly smirked himself, before forcing his voice back into seriousness again. "Listen to me. This is the worst part. Once the stitching's loose, the rest is pressure. Still pain but different."

Rowan squeezed their eyes shut, sighing "I hate you for knowing that."

"I know," Mojave said.

Another stitch came free.

Rowan growled, biting back a scream. Not loud, more shredded, like their throat couldn't afford volume anymore. Their head jerked involuntarily, antlers shifting a fraction of an inch.

Mojave swore under his breath and slammed a hand against their sternum, holding them back in place. "*Don't.*"

"I didn't *mean* to," Rowan whimpered, tears finally leaking out despite them trying not to let it happen. "I didn't—I *swear*—"

"I know," he repeated, firmer now. "Stay with me."

Rowan nodded weakly, forehead dripping, breath coming in broken pulls. "Just—just tell me before you do anything," they begged. "*Please.*"

"I will," Mojave promised.

He finished the last stitch.

Rowan sagged forward slightly, chest heaving. The antlers felt... looser. Not free. But no longer fused to their skull with that cruel, biting tension.

Mojave stepped back, assessing his work.

"That was just the prep," he said.

Rowan laughed hysterically, then immediately regretted it as pain flared again. "You're sick."

"Yes," Mojave replied calmly. "But I'm not careless."

He moved back in, hands bracing the base of the antlers, not pulling yet just.. steadying.

Rowan froze, every muscle screaming to flee.

"*Hey,*" Mojave said, unexpectedly gentle. "You still with me?"

Rowan swallowed, nodding. "Barely."

“Good,” Mojave said. “Because if you pass out now, you’ll wake up halfway through and hate me more.”

Rowan huffed a breath that might’ve been a laugh. “Bold of you to assume I won’t anyway.”

Mojave’s grip tightened, securing around the base.

“On three,” he said. “Not pulling yet. Just testing.”

Rowan braced, knuckles white.

“One.”

Their heart pounded so hard it felt like it might split their ribs.

“Two.”

Every nerve screamed in anticipation.

Mojave paused.

“...You’re doing better than you think,” he added quietly.

Rowan whispered back, through clenched teeth, “You don’t get credit for this.”

Mojave’s mouth twitched.

“Three.”

And the pressure began.

Mojave didn’t hesitate.

The moment he felt the slightest give of bone loosening where Atticus had forced it in. He committed.

And he yanked.

Hard and fast. Like a bandaid.

Rowan’s scream tore out of them like something being ripped from the inside of their chest, raw and almost animalistic, more shredded than the bobcats screams. Their whole body arched violently, fingers clawing at Mojave’s arms, nails digging into fur as if anchoring themselves to reality was the only thing keeping their skull from splitting in two.

There was a sound.

Wet and.. squishy, like.. like.. mashing around a good ol bowl of busting mac and cheese..
(???)

The antler came free in Mojave’s hands, slick with blood.

Rowan sobbed openly now, choking on air, vision swimming in different colors. Blood poured down their face in hot spills like a waterfall, soaking their lashes, their cheeks, their collar. Their legs buckled completely.

“Hey—hey—stay with me,” Mojave snapped, dropping the antler without a second thought and immediately clamping both hands to Rowan’s head, pressing hard at the wound.

The pressure hurt.. *God, it hurt..* but it was grounding in a way. Rowan clung to him desperately, forehead pressed into Mojave’s chest, breath coming in broken, panicked gasps.

“I— I—” Rowan tried to speak but it dissolved into a sob. Their body shook violently, shock crashing in all at once now that the pain had peaked and begun to ebb into something deeper, terrifyingly unreal.

Their eyes rolled.

“No,” Mojave growled. “No, don’t you *fucking d—*”

Rowan went limp anyway.

Their weight collapsed fully against him, knees giving out, consciousness slipping clean away like a switch flipped off. For a moment, Mojave just stood there, holding them upright by sheer grip alone, blood soaking his gloves, fur, and the floor.

Then he moved.

“*Shit,*” he muttered, sharp and low, not panicked, but fast.

He eased Rowan down onto the table with care that didn’t match his words, keeping pressure on the wound with one hand while ripping gauze from the kit with the other. He packed it tight and firm, blood immediately blooming through the fabric.

“Stay asleep,” he muttered, almost a command, as if Rowan could somehow hear, “Do not wake up yet...”

He cleaned fast, efficiently working around Rowan’s slack face, their lashes clumped with tears and blood, mouth parted as they breathed shallowly. He checked their pulse. It was strong, way too fast, but still there.

Good.

He wrapped their head, tight but not crushing, anchoring the dressing so it wouldn’t slip. His hands were steady, even if his jaw was set hard enough to crack.

“Stupid,” he muttered, not at Rowan. At Atticus. At the situation. At the fact this would all be for nothing.

But he still didn’t let go.

Chapter End Notes

For shits and giggles, I made Mojave a Pinterest called "ApexPurrdator." One of my readers inspired me lmao

Anyway. Get ready for Rowan to go into labor 🍌

Chapter 23: Stay Awake With Me

Chapter Summary

Mojave keeps Rowan awake for 8 hours

Chapter Notes

Sorry, I meant to get this out sooner, but got busy. So I decided to make this a bit extra longer for yall

(; V ;)

And OMMGG I RECEIVED MY FIRST FANART TOO♥♥♥

I printed it out and put it on my fridge. They made more and its so cute. I love it smm. You guys are so awesomee. Check it out, its by Honorlight on youtube!

I also made some more art yesterday night of Mojave and Rowan in chibi form. I was practicing a new artstyle. I kinda hate it.. alot actually.

I'll put the art of Rowan giving birth to kittens for you nasty NASTY freaks at the bottom of the chapter😞😞including the fridge.

That's a sentence I never thought I'd say.

...I'm probably the first one in my bloodline to say it.

And I never wanna say it again.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Rowan came back in pieces.

Not the dramatic kind. The humiliating kind, where consciousness doesn't just calmly return, it gets yanked back by the throat, gagging and confused, like it walked into the wrong room and can't remember why.

Somewhere far away, a voice cut through the thick black void.

“Wake up.”

Rowan didn't.

A harder shake. Nails digging through fabric, into muscle. A light slap. A jostle. Pressure on their cheek.

“*Rowan.*”

Their eyelids fluttered like they weighed ten pounds each. The first breath they managed tasted like pennies and cotton. Their tongue felt too big in their mouth. Their skull.. fuck, their skull was a furnace stuffed with broken glass.

Rowan’s eyes cracked open, unfocused.

Light stabbed in.

They made a noise half a whine, half a growl, and tried to curl away from it, but their head punished them for the movement. It felt like someone was turning their skull like a doorknob from the inside.

“—*oh my god*—” Rowan groaned, voice raspy. “Ow. Ow—fuck—what—”

Mojave leaned into their field of vision, too sharp and awake for someone who just performed amateur neurosurgery on a workbench table.

Rowan blinked at him like he was a hallucination that refused to dissolve.

“Took you long enough,” Mojave muttered sharply, fingers gripping the back of their neck to force their head upright. “Stay awake.”

Rowan lifted a trembling hand to their temple.

Thick Bandages wrapped tight around their head.

And one side,

one side felt... lighter.

“Are they... gone?” Rowan slurred, voice thick. The words didn’t feel connected to their brain. “The antlers. *Are they*—”

Mojave’s ears twitched. “Well,” he said, maddeningly even, “*one* is.”

Rowan’s eyes widened a fraction. Then they narrowed, the motion alone made them hiss in pain.

“Fuck you,” Rowan whispered with feeling.

Mojave hummed, “Mm. Later,” Mojave deadpanned.

Rowan tried to lift a hand to their head and immediately regretted having limbs. Their fingers hovered, scared to touch anything. Everything from the neck up felt like it didn’t belong to them anymore, like Atticus’s work had rewired their sense of ownership.

“I thought my head split apart,” Rowan murmured, voice cracking on the edge of a laugh that turned into a grimace. “I thought I—I felt it—”

“You did,” Mojave said.

Rowan stared at him, pupils blown wide, trying to understand the fact that time had passed and they were still... here.

They swallowed hard. “You didn’t... let me die.”

Mojave stared back, unblinking. “No.”

Rowan’s throat bobbed. Their eyes burned, not with tears this time, just the strain of existing.

“...Are we doing the other one next?” Rowan asked, already dreading the answer, already tasting metal again.

Mojave’s gaze flicked up to Rowan’s remaining antler, then away. “No,” he said. “Not tonight.”

Rowan tried to sit up and got halfway before the room tilted like a ship. They fell back with a groan. “Why not,” they rasped. “Get it over with—”

“Because you might not survive it,” Mojave cut in, flat as a hammer. “Too risky. You blackout again, I might not get you back.”

That shut Rowan up for two seconds.

Mojave reached behind Rowan’s head and adjusted the thick bandages, tight enough to hold, careful enough not to rip. Rowan felt the pressure and whimpered without meaning to. Their pride tried to flare up, then immediately collapsed under the weight of their own exhaustion.

Mojave’s voice went clinical in the way it always did when something mattered. “You lost blood. You almost blacked out twice. You’re dizzy, you’re nauseous, you’re slurring.” His claws tapped the side of Rowan’s head, not on the wound, just near it. “This is a head injury. Nothing cute. Nothing poetic. *Dangerous.*”

Rowan’s eyes fluttered.

Mojave leaned closer, forcing their focus.

“I need you awake for the next eight hours,” he said. “No matter how tired you are.”

Rowan stared at him like he’d just announced they were running a marathon through hell barefoot.

“...Eight,” Rowan echoed.

“Yes.”

Rowan's eyelids drooped again. Their voice slurred again, tired and absolutely fucking miserable.

"Mm... *no*."

Mojave's ears flicked. "Rowan."

Rowan's head lolled slightly against the cushion. "Mhhmmm.. yeh."

Mojave's stare sharpened. "No," he corrected. "You're concussed. Severe head trauma. If you sleep again, you might not wake up. So no."

Rowan's lips twitched. "I *want* one."

Mojave froze.

"You just ripped a horn out of my skull," Rowan murmured. "I think I earned... a nap. A nice... long.. nap. Sounds kinda.. nice actually.." Rowan's mouth curled weakly. "Sleeping for days. No pain. No killing. *No you*."

"...Stop" Mojave said sharply.

Rowan's eyes fluttered. "You put me through hell," they mumbled. "Little coma vacation sounds fair."

Mojave narrowed his eyes.

Rowan's eyes slid shut. Their breath slowed. The kind of slow that made the air around them feel suddenly too quiet.

Mojave's posture changed instantly. No patience left. No teasing.

"Rowan." His voice snapped like a leash.

Nothing.

Rowan's chin dipped.

Mojave exhaled, irritated, then his hand shot up and wrapped around the base of Rowan's remaining antler.

Not gently.

Just enough pressure to light every nerve in Rowan's skull on fire.

Rowan's body jerked like they'd been electrocuted.

They let out a furious hoarse scream, hands flying up and stopping short because they couldn't touch their head without wanting to die.

“*FUCK—!*” Rowan gasped, eyes wide, tears springing instantly from sheer pain. “WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU—”

“You fall asleep again, I pull harder.”

Rowan panted, shaking with anger and agony, face twisting into annoyance. “I hate you,” they choked.

“I know,” Mojave replied, like it was background noise.

Rowan’s head throbbed like a heartbeat made of knives. Their vision was still swimming. Their whole body felt hollowed out yet heavy at the same time.

Mojave crouched in front of them again, studying their pupils like he actually gave a damn whether they were symmetrical or not.

“Stay with me,” he said, quieter. “Look at me. Count, or talk, or swear at me. I don’t care. Just don’t drift.”

Rowan’s eyes went unfocused again on purpose, petty and exhausted. “I’m going to *piss* on you.”

“..Oh,” Mojave said, momentarily confused by the threat. He slid an arm behind Rowan’s back and tried to help them up.

Rowan did absolutely nothing to assist. They were a limp resentful ragdoll in human form, dead weight and spite.

Mojave grunted, adjusting his grip, and hauled them upright anyway. Rowan swayed immediately, forehead tipping forward like it wanted to detach.

“My stomach—” Rowan croaked. “—I’m gonna throw up—”

“No,” Mojave said immediately.

“I am— I am, I *swear*—”

“*Swallow* it.”

“*That’s what she—*” Rowan gagged loudly before they could joke.

Mojave groaned, disgusted and exasperated in equal measure. “Not here, Rowan. *Move.*”

“I can’t—” Rowan clamped their hand over their mouth and gagged again, stumbling away from the table. “I’m— *oh god—* Mojave—”

“Fine,” he snapped, grabbing them under the arms like a ragdoll. “Come on. Bathroom. Now. I am *not* cleaning—”

Rowan bent forward violently.

Mojave yanked them upright again.

“Don’t you fucking *dare* vomit on my floor—”

“That’s— that’s not— how vomit works—!” Rowan wheezed. Their body clenched. They gagged again.

Mojave swore hard under his breath, dragging them toward a bucket with all the patience of a parent hauling a drunk toddler.

“Open your mouth in the bucket, *not* on me,” Mojave commanded.

Mojave shoved the battered plastic bucket under their face the way you’d shove a one under a leaking ceiling about to burst.

“In. **There.**”

Rowan barely registered the bucket before their body obeyed the cruelty of physics.

They vomited.

Hard.

Not the dainty little *oh no I’m ill* kind. It was the kind of puke that felt like it came up from the soles of their feet, hot, disgustingly sour and iron-tinged, mixed with bile and whatever venison their body had decided was a personal betrayal.

Rowan gripped the rim of the bucket like it was the only thing anchoring them to reality. Their shoulders shook. Their eyes watered. Their throat burned.

Mojave clicked his tongue like a man inconvenienced by biology.

Then, without thinking about it, cause if he did he’d hate himself for it, he gathered Rowan’s hair back in one fist, holding it off their face. “Breathe through your nose,” he ordered, voice low. “Slow.”

Rowan coughed between heaves, spit stringing at their lip, words slurring into misery. “I hate you.”

Mojave’s grip tightened at their scalp, not painful, just firm. “Shut up and puke,” he said. “Keep your eyes open.”

Rowan gagged again and emptied the last of it into the bucket, the sound echoing off concrete like a failed metal screamo. Their whole body trembled afterward, shaking in that hollow feverish way that comes when the storm finally passes and leaves you with nothing but wreckage.

They hung there over the bucket, panting.

For a few seconds, their eyes went unfocused. Their lashes fluttered. Their breathing slowed.

Mojave noticed immediately.

“Don’t you dare,” he snapped, grabbing their shoulder.

Rowan swallowed hard, throat scraping. “I’m... I’m awake..”

“Barely.”

Rowan spat bitterly into the bucket and tried to sit back, and the room tilted, hard. They made a small pathetic sound they would’ve murdered anyone else for hearing.

Mojave sighed through his nose, disgusted at the softness that kept happening against his will.

He reached out to grab a rag from somewhere, an old shirt, a towel, something that looked like it had lived through worse than this, and wiped Rowan’s mouth.

Not gentle, but not cruel either.

“Open,” he said.

Rowan blinked at him like he’d asked them to recite the alphabet.

Mojave narrowed his eyes. “*Open* your mouth.”

Rowan obeyed, barely.

Mojave wiped their lips, then their chin, then the corner of their mouth where bile had clung. He wiped once more slowly, and Rowan flinched, more from the closeness than the pressure. Their head throbbed like a warning drum. The bandages felt tight. Their remaining antler pulsed in time with their heartbeat like a sick reminder that they'd repeat all this again soon.

Rowan whispered, exhausted and rough, “Can I die now.”

“No.”

Rowan closed their eyes. “I’m asking politely.”

Mojave hooked two fingers under their jaw and forced their face up. “Stay awake.”

Rowan’s eyes opened, glassy and furious.

Mojave grunted and adjusted his grip, dragging them up the basement stairs.

Rowan, once again, did absolutely nothing to help.

Not even a little.

Their feet dragged. Their knees buckled. Their weight slumped like a sack of wet laundry that had given up on physics entirely.

“...Really?” Mojave muttered, adjusting his grip as Rowan’s head lolled dangerously like a newborn with no neck support.

Rowan mumbled something incoherent that might’ve been a threat or a prayer.

Mojave clicked his tongue again, annoyed as he continued to drag them up the basement stairs. Rowan’s boots caught on every other step. Their body bounced. They hissed faintly every time their head jolted.

“*Pick* your feet up,” Mojave snapped.

“I don’t... *have* feet,” Rowan slurred. “They.. they went on strike.”

Mojave growled under his breath, making a sound like he wanted to throw them down the stairs and then remembered that would be inconvenient. He practically threw the rest of them up.

“Water,” he said, hauling them upward. “You’re getting water. And if you pass out on me—”

“You’ll grab my antler,” Rowan muttered.

“Yes,” Mojave said, without shame. “Correct.”

Rowan stumbled at the top step, their knees buckling. Mojave caught them by the back of the shirt and yanked them upright like a misbehaving dog. Rowan leaned on him fully now, forehead tipping toward Mojave’s shoulder, body sagging like they belonged there. Their pride tried to protest, but their body ignored it.

Mojave’s arm slid around their waist, keeping them upright as he marched them into the kitchen.

Rowan’s eyes tracked the floor with intense focus, like if they looked up the ceiling would fall.

Mojave opened the cabinet open with one hand, grabbing an old water bottle and shoving it into Rowan’s hands.

Rowan stared at it.

Mojave stared back.

Rowan closed one eye. “Huh..”

Mojave’s jaw ticked. “Drink. Slowly.”

Rowan took one tiny sip and immediately looked like it hurt their feelings. Their stomach flipped in protest. They gagged once..

Mojave’s ears angled back, threateningly, “Do... *not*.”

Rowan swallowed hard, breathing through their nose like he'd ordered. Their hands shook around the glass.

Mojave leaned in, voice low. "You keep this down, you keep your eyes open, and you live. That's the assignment."

Rowan blinked at him, then let out a weak, breathless laugh that turned into a wince.

"Your bedside manner is *insane*."

Mojave snorted. "You're welcome."

Rowan's legs finally gave up.

They sagged sideways like a collapsing janga tower.

Mojave caught them and hauled them toward the living room with the same ruthless practicality he used for dragging meat.

Rowan's feet dragged, their head drooping. They were barely conscious, just stubborn.

Mojave reached the couch and with absolutely zero ceremony, shoved Rowan down onto it.

Rowan bounced once, groaned, and immediately curled on their side like a wounded animal trying to fold into itself.

Mojave stood over them for a second, watching, breathing steady. Then quieter, like he didn't want the words to exist, he said, "Eyes open."

Rowan's eyelids fluttered, waving a dismissive tired hand, "Yeah *Yeah I know...*" They mumbled.

Then immediately closed their eyes and dozed off again.

"ROWAN!!!" Mojave screamed.

Rowan jolted upward, "I'M AWAK—" They choked, covering their mouth as they coughed.

Mojave let out a frustrated growl, shaking his head as he turned away.

Rowan slouched deeper into the couch, sinking into the cushions like gravity wanted them dead. Their head continued to throb with every heartbeat, heavy pulses of molten pain that made the edges of their vision flicker. Their breath fogged slightly in the cold air of the room.

They leaned their head back, exhaling shakily.

And for a long moment... they just stared at the wall. At their own shadows silhouette cast in the dim kitchen light.

A person.

Barely.

With one long jagged antler jutting out of the side of their skull like a cruel joke.

Rowan blinked at it. Then frowned.

“...Do I look stupid?”

The silence that followed was insulting.

Mojave didn't even hesitate.

“Yes.”

Rowan snapped their head toward him a little too fast, instantly regretting it as the world tilted and swam. “...Wow,” Rowan muttered. “That was fast.”

Mojave gestured vaguely at the shadow, unimpressed. “You look like that deer.”

Rowan blinked. “...What deer.”

“That one from that movie.”

Rowan stared harder.

Mojave leaned back against the counter, arms crossed, completely unfazed by Rowan's growing horror.

“Open Season.”

Rowan's jaw dropped. “Are you calling me—”

“*Elliott*,” Mojave confirmed without mercy.

Rowan's face twisted like he'd just been slapped with a wet towel. “I—ARE YOU SERIOUS—?!”

Mojave shrugged. “If the shoe *fits*. ”

“I do *not* look like Elliott!”

“You have one antler.”

“IT'S NOT THE SAME—”

“It's exactly the same.”

Rowan stared at him with the level of betrayal usually reserved for court testimonies.

Mojave, meanwhile looked smug. Like this comparison delighted him.

“You’re an asshole,” Rowan grumbled, gripping the couch cushion like it was stabilizing their soul.

Mojave smirked. “You asked.”

Rowan almost threw the water bottle at him.

Almost.

But that required strength and moral courage.

And They had neither.

They slumped further, groaning. “I can’t believe you even know what Open Season is.”

Mojave’s ears perked slightly. “It’s my favorite movie.”

Rowan froze.

...

“...What.”

Mojave shrugged one shoulder, casual as someone admitting they occasionally enjoy herbal tea. “It’s funny.”

Rowan stared like Mojave had just announced he loved knitting sweaters for frogs.

“You,” Rowan said slowly, “the psychotic desert cat... likes Open Season.”

“Yes.”

Rowan’s voice cracked. “That is so weird.”

Mojave tilted his head, ears flicking. “Why?”

“Because you’re... YOU!”

“So?”

“So?! You skin animals, you eat animals, you hunt animals—Open Season is about—”

“*Exactly*,” Mojave interrupted. “It’s just like the desert.”

Rowan gawked. “No it isn’t!”

“It is for the hunter guy.”

Rowan’s shoulders slumped. “Oh my god.”

“He’s my favorite,” Mojave added, like it was obvious.

“OF COURSE HE IS,” Rowan snapped. “Of course your favorite character—your favorite character.. is the psychopath with the rifle who hunts things for fun..”

“Yes.”

Rowan scrubbed a hand over their face, wincing as the bandages tugged. “Why am I even surprised.”

Mojave tilted his head. “Who’s your favorite?”

Rowan opened their mouth.

Then paused, grimacing slightly, like they knew what Mojave would have to say about it.

They Looked at Mojave.

Then sighed. “...*Boog*.”

Mojave scoffed instantly. “Obviously.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!”

“You’re a *Boog*.”

Rowan glared. “HOW.”

“You both were dropped into the wilderness for reasons you don’t understand and can’t let go of your mundane lives due to human domestication, therefore are incapable of surviving the wild despite being nature’s perfect predators.”

Rowan pointed weakly at him. “I WILL kill you.”

“You tried.”

“I’ll try again.”

“No,” Mojave said firmly. “You won’t. You’re a *Boog*.”

Rowan hated that their face warmed at that.

Rowan stared at him for a long second, their jaw tight, because the worst part was that Mojave was right.

And they hated that.

They hated that the room kept tilting like the universe was trying to gently fold them into the carpet and call it mercy.

Rowan dragged a slow breath in through their nose, trying to pin themselves to reality with sheer spite. They adjusted on the couch, shoulders hunched, one hand gripping the cushion so hard their knuckles went pale.

“Okay,” Rowan muttered, forcing their eyes open wider like that would solve everything. “Okay. If I pass out—”

“I’ll wake you,” Mojave cut in immediately.

Rowan’s eyes flicked up. “...With pain.”

“Yes.”

Rowan let out a sound halfway between a laugh and a sob, then winced because even that made their skull flare. They rubbed their face with both hands, carefully avoiding the bandages, and stared at the floor like it was personally insulting them.

“I don’t think I can do this,” Rowan whispered, voice cracked and scraped raw. “I feel like I’m already dying.”

Mojave didn’t respond right away. He watched Rowan’s eyelids droop, watched their head sag a fraction, watched their body try to negotiate with gravity.

Rowan swallowed thickly, breath hitching. “Death is literally whispering in my ear,” they said, slurring a little, like the words were too heavy. “Like some seductive sexy stripper I shouldn’t be falling in love with.”

Mojave blinked.

“...That is a weird, very specific metaphor.”

Rowan’s mouth twitched. “Yeah well, my brain’s on fire and my soul is getting catcalled by the afterlife. Sorry my metaphors are horny.”

Mojave’s ears flicked like he didn’t know whether to be offended or impressed.

Rowan’s eyelids fluttered again. They forced them open with visible effort, like lifting shutters in a storm. “I’m not gonna make it eight hours,” Rowan muttered. “I’m telling you right now, I’m not. I’m gonna blink and wake up in hell with a complimentary mint and a pamphlet.”

Mojave exhaled through his nose, clearly annoyed at the drama, clearly aware it wasn’t actually drama. “I can make you coffee,” he offered, as if this was a normal evening problem.

Rowan stared at him, dead-eyed. “Coffee.”

“Yes.”

Rowan’s lips parted. They looked like they were trying to process the concept of coffee being the answer to this. “Even twelve cups of coffee won’t stop me from meeting God,” Rowan whispered. “Like... I’m gonna be sipping espresso while shaking hands with Jesus. That’s how this ends.”

"Bold of you to assume you'd be meeting him of all people.." Mojave snickered, smirking at his own joke.

Rowan just glared, clearly not in the mood to discuss their afterlife predicament when they already crave death so deeply currently.

Mojave looked ready to say something else, until Rowan beat him to it.

"Do you have drugs?"

Mojave paused.

Rowan's voice got more urgent, pleading frantically in the way exhaustion becomes when it realizes pain isn't done with you yet.

"*Any* kind. I don't care. Legal, not legal, stolen from a pharmacy, brewed in a bathtub—" Rowan's eyes unfocused, then snapped back. "Something. *Anything*. I need the pain to shut up for five minutes. Just five. *Please*."

Mojave stared at them.

"...I did *not* take you for a cokehead."

"I'm NOT— I just—"

"I'm kind of icked out right now, honestly."

"I'M NOT A JUNKIE!!" Rowan dragged a hand down their face again. "I JUST.. I just.. need SOMETHING. Anything. I am begging you. If a drug dealer walked through that door right now, I would kiss him on the mouth. Tongue and everything."

Mojave's nose wrinkled. "Don't ever say that again."

Rowan looked like they might cry from sheer desperation. "Mojave... please. I need something to make this stop. Just for an hour. Five minutes. Thirty seconds. I'll take anything. A sedative. A vape. A leaf from a poisonous plant. A cursed desert mushroom. I DO NOT CARE."

They hated how desperate they sounded. And they hated that they couldn't stop.

Then Mojave sighed, and finally spoke, measured and unimpressed,

"I have drugs.."

Rowan's head sagged with immediate relief, like the words alone were anesthesia. Their eyes fluttered.

"You *beautiful* bastard," Rowan breathed, almost awe.

Mojave snorted. "Don't get excited."

Mojave stood and walked to a cabinet, and rummaged like he was grabbing cereal. Bottles clinked. A drawer opened, then closed. Mojave returned from the cabinet with exactly the level of casualness a person should not have when holding unknown drugs.

He dropped the handful onto the coffee table with a blunt clack, all landing in a little sacrilegious pile.

Rowan blinked at it blearily.

“...That’s a lot of... shapes,” they muttered.

Mojave ignored that. He separated the pile into two neat groups with the tip of a claw. The first group were painkillers, anti-inflammatory, and nausea medication. And the second group? Well, it was hardly a group at all, just a single capsule in a dark blue gel shell, almost iridescent.

Mojave tapped the blue pill.

“*This*, ” he said, “will keep you awake.”

Rowan stared. “Great. Give.”

Mojave held up a finger. “No. You need to listen fir—”

Too late.

Rowan’s hand shot out fast only in the sloppy, concussed way, and snatched the pill, swallowing it whole like they were damn vitamins.

No hesitation. Not even a question. Just.. blind, feral desperation.

Mojave froze.

Rowan froze.

They stared at each other for a good long moment. Rowan slowly.. opened the water bottle, sipping on it, which was somehow the loudest sip ever heard in mankind..

And then slowly, closing the lid.. and lowering the waterbottle like a guilty raccoon who just stole someone’s jewelry.

Mojave blinked.

“...Did you just swallow that without knowing what it is.”

Rowan nodded shamefully. “..Yes.”

“You absolute *dumb* bitch.”

“I’m desperate.”

They stared for another long moment.

Mojave rubbed his face with both hands like he needed to physically scrub the stupidity out of the air. "...I was," he said through his fingers, "going to tell you what happens when you *take* it. But since you've already shoved it down your throat like a starving pelican—" He dropped his hands and leaned forward. "here's what's gonna happen..."

Rowan swallowed. "Okay.."

"You are," Mojave said, "going to stay awake."

"Good."

"For at least twelve hours."

"...*Good?*"

"But," Mojave continued, voice flattening like steel meeting anvil, "you are also going to hallucinate."

Rowan stared.

"Hallucinate... *what*, exactly?"

"Everything," Mojave said cheerfully.

Rowan blinked. "...*Everything?*"

"Shapes. Colors. People. Animals. Sounds. Things that aren't real. Things you want to see. Things you don't want to see. Things that make zero sense. Things that make too much sense." Mojave gestured vaguely. "It's a psychedelic stimulant. Bitter as hell. Keeps your body awake while your brain goes sightseeing."

Rowan stared at him in dawning horror. "Why... why do you even HAVE that?"

Mojave shrugged. "Gifts."

"That's not— that's not an answer—"

"You'll get over it," he said.

"No I won't—"

"You'll live."

"*Mojave—*"

"It won't *kill* you."

Rowan inhaled sharply. "WHAT IF IT DOES—"

Mojave leaned in, eyes narrowing. “I’m not letting you sleep. That was the issue. This solves the issue.”

Rowan’s breath trembled. “What are the side effects.”

Mojave ticked them off on his claws, “You’ll shake. You’ll sweat. Your pupils will dilate. Your heart’s gonna feel like it’s beating in your throat. Words will sound weird. Lights will look weird. You might think you hear footsteps. You might think the shadows move. You might think I have three faces at one point.”

Rowan’s face went pale.

“And,” Mojave added casually, “you’ll definitely cry at least once.”

“...Why.”

“Because humans cry when their nervous system is confused,” Mojave said. “Don’t worry. I’ll mock you for it later.”

Rowan shut their eyes tight. “I’m gonna die.”

“You’re not,” Mojave said firmly.

“You’re not a doctor.”

“No,” he said. “I’m better. I’ve seen every ugly way someone can fall apart. I know what to look for.”

Rowan opened their eyes again, dazed and terrified. “Is it going to be ugly.”

Mojave didn’t soften.

“Absolutely.”

Rowan slumped back. “Oh my fucking god..”

“But,” Mojave continued, voice lowering to something more steady, “you’re not doing it alone.”

Rowan blinked at him.

“I’ll be with you all night,” Mojave said. “Every minute of it. If something goes wrong, I’ll catch it.”

Rowan’s lip trembled. “I don’t.. want to see things.”

“Well you should've thought about that before you went ahead and swallowed unknown pills like a fucking singular celled frat boy, you dumb fuck.”

Rowan swallowed, throat tight.

“What if I freak out...”

“I’ll handle it.”

“What if I try to stand.”

“I’ll pin you.”

“What if I scream.”

“I’ll cover your mouth.”

“What if I stop breathing.”

“You won’t.”

“What if—”

Mojave gripped Rowan’s chin, forcing their gaze up. “Rowan,” he said, voice suddenly razor-calm. “*Look* at me.”

Rowan did.

“You’re going to go through hell for a few hours,” Mojave said. “But you’re going to do it awake. And you’re going to do it with me here.”

...

Then Rowan whispered, voice cracking,

“...When does it start.”

Mojave looked at the clock.

“Soon.”

Rowan stared forward, pupils already blown wide.

“Define... *soon*. ”

Mojave shrugged lightly,

“About fifteen minutes.”

Rowan stared at Mojave like he’d just announced a weather forecast instead of a chemical spiritual journey.

“...Fifteen minutes,” Rowan echoed, voice thin. “That’s not ‘*soon*. ’ That’s immediate. That’s like... microwave time.”

"Who the fuck puts their microwave on for 15 minutes?"

"I DID. *Once*.. cause.. my oven was broken and.. I really wanted to eat my frozen pizza so.. that's what I did.."

Mojave just stared.

"Tasted.. really bad actually.. Probably all that radiation. That's why I use a.. kettle for tea now."

Mojave blinked, and then looked upward toward the ceiling like he was waiting for God or even Anora to Intervene.

Rowan's fingers worried at the blanket like it might anchor them to reality. "Do you—" they swallowed, throat tight, "do you promise you're actually supervising me all night?"

Mojave glanced back over, exhausted. Mentally. "Yes."

Rowan's brow pinched. "Like. Promise *promise*. Not 'yes' like you say yes and then you go take a nap and I wake up seeing spiders wearing my face."

Mojave stared at them, unimpressed. "I'm not leaving," Mojave said, flat. "If you start seeing nonsense, I tell you what's real and what isn't."

Rowan blinked hard. The fear didn't go away, but it... shifted. Like it got a leash. "...Okay," Rowan whispered. "Okay. That helps. A *little*."

Mojave's ear flicked. "Good. Because you already swallowed it."

Rowan's lips pressed together. "Yeah. I did that."

"No refunds," Mojave said, and moved to sit next to Rowan on the couch, getting comfortable, putting their paws up on the table.

Silence settled.

A few minutes passed in a tense, twitchy quiet. Rowan's pain, that constant shrieking presence began to dull around the edges, like someone turned the volume down. It didn't vanish, but it stopped being the only thing in the universe.

Rowan exhaled shakily. "Oh."

Mojave watched them for a moment, voice quieter, like consideration, or maybe just worn out irritation. "Pain's quieter?"

Rowan nodded, dazed. "It's... still there. But it's not... chewing through my brain."

"Good."

Rowan swallowed again, and their eyes darted to a corner of the room.

Rowan's head tipped back against the couch. Their eyes tracked the ceiling like it was a suspicious witness.

The first hallucination came soft.

A sound like distant water dripping in a place that shouldn't have water.

Rowan's head turned sharply. "Do you hear that?"

Mojave didn't even look up. "No."

Rowan went rigid. "So it's fake."

"Yes."

Rowan blew out a breath. "Okay.."

Mojave finally looked at them. "If you start panicking, you'll spiral."

"I'm already spiraling."

"No," Mojave said flatly. "You're preheating. Don't bake."

Rowan stared. "...*What.*"

Mojave blinked. "Stay awake."

Rowan's gaze drifted again. The strobe lights from earlier, Mojave had turned them off, thankfully, but the kitchen still felt like it had a pulse. Shadows looked a little too sharp. The corners of the room felt... crowded.

"...Did that lamp just breathe?"

Mojave didn't even look. "No."

Rowan stared harder. "It did. It did the little—"

"It did not." Mojave finally glanced up. "It's a lamp."

Rowan exhaled shakily. "Okay.."

Mojave nodded once, like yes, excellent, you've identified the concept of inanimate objects.

A minute passed.

Rowan's gaze flicked to the hallway.

"...Did you hear someone whisper my name?"

Mojave didn't blink. "No."

Rowan's shoulders tightened. "But it sounded like—"

"*Rowan*," Mojave said. "Your incompetent human little ears are nothing compared to my feline hearing. If a coyote was gutted a mile away, i'd hear it before you."

Rowan swallowed. "..Okay."

"Good." Mojave leaned back, arms folding. "Now keep talking. Keep your eyes open."

Rowan nodded, then squinted at Mojave like a scientist discovering a new species.

"...Question."

Mojave sighed like this was a prank he didn't sign up for. "Go."

Rowan gestured vaguely at Mojave's entire existence. "Do you cough up furballs."

...

Mojave stared at them. "No."

Rowan's brows knit. "Are you lying?"

Mojave's voice went even flatter. "I'm not a housecat."

"But you have fur," Rowan insisted, as if this was a courtroom. "Fur equals hairballs. That's science."

Mojave's expression didn't change at all. "No."

Rowan pointed weakly. "But.. You're... cat-shaped."

Mojave blinked once. "Next."

Rowan frowned. "Do you get scared of cucumbers."

Mojave stared. "...Why would I be afraid of cucumbers."

Rowan shrugged. "I saw a video."

Mojave's eyes narrowed. "Of what."

"Cats..."

Mojave leaned forward slightly. "Rowan. If you throw a cucumber at me, I will break your fingers."

Rowan nodded like that was fair. "Okay.."

Mojave sank back again. "Next."

Rowan's eyes brightened with horrifying curiosity. "Do you purr when someone pets you."

Mojave stared at them for a long time. Long enough that Rowan started to sweat. Then Mojave said, in the same flat tone,

"No one's pet me before."

Rowan's mouth fell open. "ARE YOU SERIOUS."

Mojave rolled their eyes, "Yes, and even if they did, they wouldn't live to tell the tale without losing an arm."

Rowan furrowed their brows, frowning, "That doesn't answer my question though.."

Mojave's ear flicked. "Next."

Rowan's face crumpled in offended wonder. "Why are all your answers so vague?"

Mojave pointed at Rowan with a claw. "Keep your eyes open."

Rowan forced their gaze up, blinking hard. "Okay.. Supervisor."

They shifted, blanket sliding, and flinched as their scalp tugged. Mojave's eyes flicked to the bandages like he was counting breaths.

Rowan breathed. The room drifted. The shadows softened. The pain stayed quiet, for now...

Another minute passed.

Rowan's pupils looked huge now, like they were trying to drink the room.

Rowan whispered, "The floor is moving."

Mojave didn't look down. "It isn't."

Rowan's breath hitched. "Okay."

...

"Your ears are... vibrating."

Mojave's eyes narrowed. "My ears are fine."

Rowan nodded again, swallowing hard. "Okay. Your ears are... normal."

"Correct."

Rowan slumped back like they deserved a medal for surviving their own brain. They drifted quiet for a bit. Mojave stayed nearby, annoyingly steady, like a guard dog that hated you but still didn't let wolves through the door.

And then abruptly, Rowan went still.

Not in a sleepy way.

In a way that made even the air feel different.

“Hey.”

Mojave’s gaze flicked over. “What.”

Rowan swallowed, throat bobbing. Their hands fidgeted with the blanket like they were trying to wring words out of fabric.

“... You wanna know what I was thinking about,” Rowan murmured, “the whole time I was in Atticus’s basement?”

Mojave’s mouth twitched. “Probably why kindness never got you anywhere.”

Rowan gave a small hum, almost amused. “Yeah. That too.” Rowan stared at the ceiling again, blinking slowly like the words were heavy.

“And also.. I was thinking of *you*,” they said.

That did it.

Mojave’s posture changed. Subtle. Still. Like something locked in.

Mojave didn’t move much, he barely ever did, but something in his face sharpened. Attention sliding into place like a blade aligning.

Rowan kept talking before they could chicken out. “The whole time,” Rowan repeated, voice rough. “Like... stupid things. Not even heroic things. Just... you.” they paused. “I thought about... how Atticus treated me like I wasn’t even a person,” Rowan said. “The cage. The tag. The way he measured me like... inventory. Like I was meat he hadn’t decided how to cook yet.”

Rowan’s fingers tightened around the blanket. “Because Atticus—” their mouth twisted, disgust and memory tangling, “—he made it so clear what it feels like to be... nothing. Like you’re a thing. Like you’re inventory.”

Their eyes watered and they looked furious about it.

Mojave’s eyes didn’t leave Rowan’s face.

Rowan swallowed, throat bobbing. “And it’s sick, but— he made me think about you. Like... the bare minimum you ever gave me that he never did.”

Mojave’s jaw ticked once.

Rowan laughed once, quiet and bitter. “A couch. A shower. Clothes. Beer. A door that locks. The stupid... normal things.” They blinked slowly, eyes shining, more from chemicals than tears, but still too close to something raw.

“He made me appreciate you,” Rowan whispered, like saying it out loud tasted wrong. “And I hate that.”

Rowan laughed again, small and bitter. “Because you’re awful. You’re— you’re a nightmare. You’re the reason my life is—” they gestured vaguely at their head, their bandages, their existence, “—*this*.”

Another swallow

Mojave didn’t speak.

“And still,” Rowan said, the word tasting wrong, “you.. treated me like.. a living thing.” Their mouth twitched like they hated that those were the examples. “You’ve saved my life. More than once.”

Mojave’s gaze didn’t soften. But something in it sharpened.

Rowan’s hands curled in the blanket. “And then I started thinking... what if I wasn’t a ‘mistake.’ What if I was... a transaction.”

Their eyes lifted, unfocused, then snapped back like the thought bit them.

“What if you and him were— I don’t know— trading me. Testing me. Using me.” Rowan’s voice wavered. “Like I was something you traded. Something you gave him. Like— like you two had some agreement and I was the— the product.” Rowan’s breath hitched. “And that thought hurt more than what he did to me.”

Mojave’s ears angled back slightly. Not guilt. Not softness.

Something tighter.

Rowan kept going anyway, because the drug had loosened the part of their brain that normally guarded the ugly truths.

“And that’s not even the worst part,” Rowan whispered.

Mojave’s voice came out low. “Then what is..”

Rowan’s throat tightened. “The moment I knew I was... permanently fucked up.”

Mojave’s gaze held them like a hook.

Rowan’s breath shook. “It wasn’t when I wanted to hurt him back.”

They swallowed hard.

“It was when I got out. When I saw you again.”

Their lips parted, a tremor passing through them.

“I felt... *relief*.”

Mojave’s ears twitched.

Silence.

The kind that feels like the world pauses to listen.

Rowan’s eyes filled again, angry and disgusted with themselves.

“Relief,” they repeated, like repeating it might make it less true. “From you. From your presence.”

A shaky breath.

Rowan blinked slowly, tears spilling now involuntarily, embarrassed now. “Like—like your presence made me feel safe. Like I wasn’t alone anymore. Knowing you were there made me feel safe,” Rowan said, voice barely above a whisper. “And that was the moment I realized there’s no going back.”

Their voice dropped to a whisper.

“I knew... I was fucked up forever.” Their eyes flicked to Mojave, then away again. “Because if you make me feel safe, after everything... then it means I’ll always put you above—”

They choked slightly, throat tightening.

“—above *anything else*.”

...

Mojave didn’t respond.

He just stared, still as a statue, eyes bright and unreadable. Not mocking. Not smiling. Not scolding.

Just... there.

He looked, almost shocked. Probably. You never know with him. Shocked that someone actually could feel anything but revulsion towards him. Anything but fear and disgust.

It was conditioning at its finest.

Successfully.

Conditioned.

Rowan sniffed once, wiped their face with the blanket like a miserable raccoon, and exhaled shakily.

“...So,” Rowan said, suddenly switching lanes like they hadn’t just confessed a whole soul, “if you purr, does it sound like a lawnmower *or like—*”

Mojave blinked.

Rowan plowed forward, committed to the whiplash. “Also, do you have like... toe beans? Because I'd like to see them.. and.. maybe touch them.. if you're fine with that, but.. its fine if.. not.”

Mojave stared at them for a long moment, then looked away with visible restraint. His hands curled into tight fists.

...

“You’re hallucinating..” he said softly.

Rowan’s mouth slowly closed.

“...Am I?”

“Yes.”

Rowan nodded, solemn like a student being corrected.

“Okay.”

They slumped back into the couch, eyes a little too wide, whispering to themselves like a mantra.

Mojave exhaled through his nose, almost a laugh and almost a growl. He rubbed his face in frustration. If he could, he'd leave the room right now, but no, he had to watch over a giant oversized toddler with one antler.

“Keep your eyes open,” he repeated, voice rougher now.

Rowan blinked hard, as if obeying could erase what they’d just admitted.

“...Yes, boss.”

Mojave exhaled through his nose, half sigh, half *I am going to regret being responsible*, and pushed off the chair, counting to ten so he didn’t commit a felony on his own couch.

“You’re not going to make it eight hours by monologuing about my... toe beans,” he said.

Rowan blinked slowly. “So... you do have—”

“Eyes open,” Mojave cut in. Then, with the tired resignation of a man walking into a storm on purpose, he decided. “I’m making coffee.” he said like it was a weapon. “If you’re going

to survive eight hours of being the world's most annoying concussion patient, you're going to need caffeine."

Rowan's eyes tracked him with the heavy, slow focus of a sedated animal. "Coffee won't fix —"

"It'll fix *something*," Mojave pointed a claw at them. "Do not sleep. Try not to merge with the furniture while I'm gone."

Rowan lifted a shaky hand in what might've been a salute or might've been their nervous system short-circuiting. "Yes, Supervisor."

Mojave disappeared into the kitchen. Cupboards opened. Something clinked. The faint sputter of an ancient coffee maker coughing itself awake floated through the house.

The house felt immediately... bigger.

Not in the normal way. In the way it always did when the only steady thing in the room walked away and left Rowan alone with a brain that was currently throwing knives at reality just to see what stuck.

Rowan's gaze drifted to the TV.

Static.

That old, dead snow-hiss that filled the screen like a thousand tiny insects moving in unison. The sound was low, constant, like a whisper that didn't have words yet.

Rowan stared.

A long while.

Not even blinking.

Their breathing slowed, and their pupils widened like they were trying to drink the static itself.

At first it was nothing. Just noise.

Then... something patterned.

A shape that didn't belong.

Not a clear image, nothing as honest as that, but a suggestion. A darker smudge within the snow, as if someone had pressed a thumbprint into the screen from the inside.

Rowan's throat tightened.

Their eyes burned, but they refused to blink. The pain medication made their body floaty, but the stimulant kept their mind nailed open, forced to watch.

The shape sharpened almost. Like a face trying to form out of dust.

Rowan blinked.

And it vanished.

Rowan's breath hitched, offended.

"...*Oh*," they whispered.

They stared again.

The smudge returned the longer they watched, creeping back into place like it was waiting for their attention. Like it needed it.

Rowan didn't realize they were sliding off the couch until their shoulder bumped the coffee table and the edge of it thudded against their shin.

They barely reacted.

They just... *sank*.

Softly slumped onto the floor like a heavy rag doll slipping off the edge, then shifted forward on their elbows slowly, their head still heavy and wrong.

Crawling.

Like a kid drawn toward a campfire even after being told it burns.

Rowan dragged themselves closer to the TV, blanket trailing behind them like a shed skin. Their bandages pulled a little, and the antler.. well, the one antler still *there*, throbbed with the reminder that their skull was still in the middle of an argument with gravity.

They stopped inches from the screen and stared like the static was going to confess something.

The shape in the snow pulsed.

Not on the screen.

Through it.

Like something behind the glass was pushing, testing, stretching.

Rowan's breath went shallow.

Their reflection in the black-and-white flicker looked wrong, face washed out, eyes too wide, one antler like a cruel joke. They watched themselves and couldn't tell where they ended and the static began.

Then..

The static bulged.

A hand emerged.

Not fully formed at first, just the suggestion of fingers, a pale shape pushing through the static like it was thick water.

Rowan froze so hard their lungs forgot what to do.

The hand reached farther.

A wrist.

Knuckles.

A palm, open toward Rowan like an invitation.

Rowan's mouth opened.

No sound came out.

Their hand rose slowly, trembling outward, mesmerized. They reached toward it like they couldn't stop themselves.

Their fingertips hovered an inch away.

The TV hissed louder, like it was excited.

And then,

"Rowan."

Rowan flinched so hard their elbow slipped, and their forehead nearly bumped the TV.

Mojave stood there with a mug in each hand, steam curling up like he'd just walked into a normal scene where humans weren't trying to shake hands with the void. He stared down at Rowan on the floor, inches from the screen, expression flat with a faint edge of *are you serious right now*.

Rowan blinked at him.

Then blinked again, slow and sticky.

"...Hi," Rowan whispered.

Mojave held up one mug. "Coffee."

Rowan slowly turned their head back to the TV.

Static.

Just static.

The hand was gone.

Nothing but dead snow and the low hiss of nothingness pretending it never tried anything.

Rowan's lips parted. They looked back at Mojave, almost accusing.

"...It was there."

Mojave's ears flicked. "No."

Rowan's jaw tightened. "Yes."

Mojave walked over and stopped beside them, looking down like he was assessing a stain on the carpet. "Rowan."

Rowan pointed weakly at the TV. "A hand was... reaching. Like—like a—like a—"

"Like a hallucination," Mojave finished, deadpan. He took a sip of his coffee.

"Congratulations. You've unlocked the Hallucinary Ring DLC special. You officially have 7 days left to live."

Rowan swallowed, voice small and shaken. "It looked... real."

Mojave crouched slightly and set one mug down on the coffee table with a deliberate clink. "That's the point."

Rowan's eyes flicked back to the TV again, suspicious.

Mojave leaned in closer, close enough that Rowan could smell the coffee and that faint iron-sand scent he always carried.

"You shouldn't sit that close to the TV," Mojave said, completely calm.

Rowan stared at him, dumbfounded. "...That's your concern?"

Mojave nodded like he was a responsible adult. "Bad for your eyes."

Rowan stared.

Then, shakily, they huffed a laugh that sounded more like a sob that didn't want to admit it existed.

"...Okay," Rowan breathed. "Okay. Fine."

Mojave extended his free hand toward Rowan, coffee mug still in the other. "Up."

Rowan looked at the offered hand, then at him. "You're not going to yank me by the antler, are you."

Mojave's mouth twitched. "Not unless you try to crawl back to the TV."

Rowan's eyes narrowed, weak but offended. "This is not an answer."

Mojave raised a brow. "Up, Rowan."

"No..."

Mojave reached out and grabbed the back of Rowan's shirt, and hauled them up like a kitten by the scruff, except with less gentleness and more *get your life together*.

Rowan wobbled, knees threatening mutiny.

Mojave steadied them with one hand on their shoulder. "Back on the couch."

As they slumped onto the couch again, Rowan glanced at the TV one more time, suspicious. Static stared back innocently, like it hadn't just tried to swallow Rowan whole.

Rowan swallowed.

Mojave steadied them with a palm to the sternum. "Drink," he ordered, nudging the mug toward their hands.

Rowan accepted it, hands trembling.

They took a sip.

It was bitter and hot, but.. grounding.

Rowan closed their eyes briefly, clinging to the normality of it.

Then they opened them again, because they had to, and looked at Mojave like a question they were afraid to ask.

"...If I see something again," Rowan said quietly, "you'll tell me it's fake."

Mojave's eyes held theirs, steady as a locked door.

"Yes," he said. "I'll tell you."

Rowan nodded once, swallowing.

"Okay," they whispered, voice small. "No more TV hands."

Mojave stared at them like he couldn't believe this was his life.

"...Good," he said.

"Now keep talking to me."

 My fridge lol (Made by HonorLight)

 Mojave And Rowan Fanart

Chapter End Notes

Idk why the thought of Open Season being Mojave's favorite movie just feels.. right for some reason. It makes me laugh cause of how RIGHT it feels.

Anyway, It looks like the next chapter will be our last.. 💔 which means it will probably also take an extra while to get out cause I need to make this PERFECT. I hope you guys are enjoying it so far 🙏

Edit: I didn't know some of you guys couldn't see the fanart on here, so I'm uploading all the fanart on my Instagram story for those who missed out. And I can re-upload them again if I have to ! :]

I'll also be uploading them to my YT permanently.

Instagram and YT is the same as my ao3 user:

Misster Goreistic

Chapter 24: When Bone Detaches (The End)

Chapter Summary

I'm sorry..

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sunrise didn't look right over Mojave's place.

It never did.

The desert usually came up gold and clean, like it wanted to pretend nothing ugly ever happened in it. But here, the light had to crawl through clutter first, over rusted barrels, broken fences and bones that weren't trying to be hidden, the crooked shadows of junk stacked like old sins.

Inside, the living room was dim and stale with the aftertaste of the night.

The TV still hissed with static, softer now, like it had finally gotten bored of trying to become a doorway. The air smelled faintly of coffee that had gone cold twice, antiseptic, and something metallic that wasn't just blood, something deeper. Something earned.

Rowan sat slumped in the same spot they'd been dying in for hours.

Not the dramatic kind of dying.

The quiet kind.

The kind where your eyes stay open because someone keeps forcing them open, but the person inside those eyes has already started packing their bags and walking away.

Their head was wrapped. One antler gone. One still there, a cruel little reminder sticking out like the punchline to a joke nobody laughed at.

Rowan made it.

Eight hours.

They didn't feel victorious. They didn't feel relieved. They felt... hollow. The kind of tired where your brain is just static and your body is running on petty spite and survival reflexes. Their eyes were open, technically, but whatever lived behind them had been turned down to a whisper.

The couch had molded around them sometime after hour three. Their bandages were stiff with dried blood at the edges. Their throat tasted like old coffee and bile. Their remaining antler throbbed in a dull constant pulse that didn't even register as pain anymore, just a fact.

Rowan's breathing was shallow, exhausted with hours of forced strength to stay awake.

The drugs were long gone. The hallucinations had faded like fog, leaving behind what they always left behind, reality, waiting with its hands on its hips.

Mojave never left.

Not really.

He'd shifted positions, paced, sat again. He'd forced Rowan to sip water like it was a chore. Checked Rowan's pupils more times than he'd admit to himself. Counted breaths without realizing he was counting. Corrected hallucinations with flat certainty until they stopped coming. He'd kept the room quiet once the drugs were gone, the way you go quiet around an animal that's finally stopped thrashing.

Now, he watched them from his chair, beer untouched now, coffee in his hand because it gave him something to do with his claws.

He looked... the same.

Too upright. But his eyes were a little different. Tired in a way Mojave didn't like to admit existed.

Time dragged. The sun climbed. The kitchen clock clicked like it was counting down to something.

Rowan blinked slowly. Their gaze had that faraway glaze of a person who'd been awake too long and was starting to forget what "*awake*" even meant.

"Did I—" Rowan's voice came out like sandpaper "Did I make it..?"

Mojave didn't look back. "You're still talking."

Rowan's lips twitched faintly. It was almost a smile. Almost. "That's... not the same thing."

Mojave finally turned his head. His eyes dragged over Rowan's bandages, the one antler that made them look like a failed taxidermy experiment. His gaze lingered on their pupils.

Then he exhaled through his nose.

"Yeah," he said. "You made it."

Rowan stared at him for a second like their brain couldn't process permission. Like their body had been waiting for those words the way starving people wait for food.

Their eyelids fluttered.

Mojave's ears twitched.

He pushed off the wall and walked closer, stopping at the end of the couch like a guard deciding whether to step away from his post. He stared down at Rowan, expression unreadable.

"Alright," he said finally.

Rowan blinked. "Alright... what."

Mojave's tone went flat, like he was annoyed he had to say it out loud.

"Go to sleep."

Rowan's mouth opened. Nothing came out at first, like they'd forgotten how to speak words.

Then stupidly, they go "Really?"

Mojave stared at them like they were stupid on purpose. "Yes," he said. "*Really.*"

Rowan's mouth opened, then closed, then opened again like their brain couldn't decide if it was allowed to accept kindness from him without paying in blood.

Mojave continued, voice low, almost businesslike. "Sleep as long as you can. If you want any chance of staying upright on the road tomorrow."

Rowan's brows drew together, slow-processing. "Road...?"

Mojave exhaled through his nose, impatient. "You're driving," he said. "Back to wherever you crawled out of. The world you keep pretending you still belong to."

Rowan stared at him.

And Mojave saw it, saw the moment the information tried to enter Rowan's exhausted brain and just... slipped right off, like water off wax.

Rowan didn't have room for "tomorrow." Rowan didn't have room for "home." Rowan didn't even have room for "regret" right now. The idea of "where they came from" felt like a story someone told them once. A myth. A movie they'd watched as a kid. Rowan couldn't imagine a road that wasn't Mojave's. A sky that didn't watch them like this.

They had room for one thing however.

Sleep.

Rowan's shoulders sagged.

Their eyelids fluttered once, then twice, like a dying moth. They didn't even lay down properly.

They just... folded.

Head tipping forward, their body slackening, breath deepening mid-sentence as if their brain grabbed the permission Mojave offered and ran with it like a thief.

Out.

Instantly.

Mojave stood there for a moment, staring at Rowan's sleeping face like it was an insult.

Like it was a crime.

Like it was something unfairly peaceful.

Rowan's mouth was slightly open. Their lashes rested against bruised skin. The bandages made them look smaller. More human. And Mojave hated that it did something to his chest.

Not warmth. Not softness.

Something worse.

Something possessive. Something that felt like a trap closing, quiet and final around his own ribs. He looked away first, like staring too long might let something seep in. He turned toward the couch where the blanket had been dragged half on the floor, and he adjusted it with two fingers. Not tucking Rowan in, he wasn't a saint.

Just... making sure the blanket covered enough that Rowan didn't get cold.

Then he stepped back, folding his arms, studying them.

Asleep. Vulnerable. Alive.

Something Mojave would never allow himself to be around another living creature. To sleep around something so dangerous was doom in itself. That's why Mojave hardly slept at all, let alone around Rowan.

And yet here they were, sleeping so soundly, like as if an apex predator didn't loom over them.

Mojave's jaw tightened.

He didn't like vulnerable things. They made him feel responsible. Responsible made him feel... weak.

And weakness..

Weakness was how you ended up eaten by the world.

Mojave's gaze flicked to Rowan's remaining antler. He imagined, briefly, the other one gone too.

The scar it would leave. The permanent indent. Healed but never fully gone. He imagined Rowan waking up without that foreign weight drilling into their skull.

He imagined Rowan leaving.

And the image didn't feel like relief.

It felt like someone dragging a dull blade under his skin.

Mojave scoffed under his breath, disgusted with himself.

"Pathetic," he muttered. Not at Rowan.

At himself.

At the fact that he'd stayed up all night supervising a concussed human like some kind of... guardian.

At the fact he'd promised to tell them what was real.

At the fact he'd actually done it.

He stared at Rowan again. Their chest rose and fell slowly.

Safe.

In his house.

Under his roof.

Because of *him*.

Mojave's ears flicked, restless.

His mind tried to bite at the thought from different angles, the way it always did, turning feeling into philosophy, emotion into something he could name and control.

They didn't choose you because they love you, he told himself. They chose you because you're the stronger monster.

That was easier.

That was true enough to live with.

But it wasn't the whole truth.

The whole truth had teeth.

The whole truth was that for one second in that hallway, Rowan's finger had settled on the trigger, and Mojave had looked down the barrel of the future and realized,

They could've ended him.

Rowan could've tried.

And the fact that Rowan didn't... didn't erase the fact that they almost did.

Mojave's claws flexed once, slow.

He imagined it again.. the muzzle. The cables. The gas burning his eyes. The indignity of being reduced. The humiliation of needing someone else to hesitate.

The image made his stomach curl. The image made his chest go cold. And that cold turned into anger because anger was safer than fear.

He walked away before he could stand there and rot in it. He moved into the kitchen, silent on the wood.

The car battery sat on the counter where he'd left it earlier, stupidly ordinary. The entire saga. The blood. The bodies. The nights.

All for a box of lead and acid.

Mojave stared at it.

Then, slowly, he reached out and tapped it with one claw.

Solid. Real.

A ridiculous prize.

He hated it.

Because Rowan had looked at it like it was supposed to mean something... and it hadn't. It had just sat there, mute and ugly, refusing to turn into "freedom" the way Rowan had begged it to.

Mojave's jaw tightened again.

He poured himself fresh coffee, not because he wanted it, but because the ritual gave him something to do besides think.

The coffeemaker gurgled. The sound filled the silence too loudly.

Mojave stared out the window toward the junk-strewn yard, where the light was getting stronger, where the world looked almost normal if you didn't look too closely.

His gaze drifted, inevitably, to the little grave outside.

The tiny wooden cross.

The words carved into it.

You were too pure for this world. Rest eternally.

Mojave didn't move toward it.

He never did in daylight.

Daylight made it feel stupid. Daylight made it feel like evidence. But he looked at it anyway, eyes narrowed like he was judging it for daring to exist.

Then he spoke quietly, to nobody. Or maybe to the house. Or maybe to the thing inside him that still remembered what it felt like to be something other than hunger.

"You think I don't know," Mojave murmured. "That this could've gone different." His voice was calm, but the words had sharp edges.

"You think I don't know I could've let them die."

He poured coffee. The stream was steady. Controlled.

"Could've let them sleep. Could've watched them go quiet. Could've told myself it wasn't my problem."

He set the mug down too hard.

It clinked.

His ears flicked back, annoyed at the sound.

"But then what?" he said, almost to himself. "They leave, if they live. They go back to whatever soft little world they came from, and they spend the rest of their life pretending this never happened."

His eyes narrowed, pupils tight.

"And I sit here," Mojave continued, voice dropping, "with nothing but the echo of it. The mess. The waste."

He stared at the battery again like it was mocking him.

He hated waste.

He hated effort that evaporated.

He hated the idea of Rowan walking away with his fingerprints on their soul and acting like it was an accident.

Mojave's mouth curved, not quite a smile.

"They're not leaving clean," he murmured. "Not after tonight. Not after Atticus. Not after the lab. Not after that trigger."

He took a sip of coffee and grimaced slightly.

He didn't add sugar. He didn't believe in softening things.

His gaze drifted back toward the living room doorway.

Toward Rowan sleeping.

That humiliating peacefulness.

Mojave was silent for a long moment.

Then he spoke again, quieter,

"You begged," he said, as if remembering it with a strange, sour satisfaction. "You looked at me like I was the only thing holding you together."

...

"And you hate yourself for it."

...

Mojave's ears twitched.

"...Good."

The word came out rough.

He set the mug down and leaned on the counter, staring at nothing, letting his mind do what it always did, circle the wound, pick at it, turn it into something he could own.

Because that was what Mojave did.

He didn't heal.

He claimed.

He wrapped his claws around the broken parts and called them his so they couldn't leave. Still... something in his chest kept returning to the same ugly little thought,

Rowan asleep on his couch.

Rowan alive because he forced them to be.

Rowan breathing under his roof.

He stood up again, moving silently back into the living room.

Rowan didn't stir.

The blanket rose and fell with their breath. Their face was slack with exhaustion, no sarcasm left in it, no fight left in their eyes.

Just... human.

Mojave looked at them for a long time. Then he spoke softly, not to wake them, not loud enough to be heard unless the world was listening very closely.

“You’re going to hate me,” he murmured.

He paused.

“But you’ll live.”

His eyes narrowed, bitter and strange.

“And you’ll remember who made sure you did.”

He turned away before the thought could turn into something worse.

He walked down the hall.

Past the door.

Grabbed the battery.

And as he left the room, Mojave’s voice came low, carried back one last time like a vow and a warning in the same breath.

“Sleep,” he murmured. “Because tomorrow you’re going to want to run.”

His eyes narrowed slightly.

“And if you run...”

He let the sentence hang, unfinished, like a blade held close to skin.

Because tomorrow?

Tomorrow was where the real choices waited.

Eventually, though

Late evening came quietly.

The house had shifted into that hollow state it only ever reached when Rowan was asleep and couldn’t argue with gravity anymore.

Mojave was in the basement.

The basement was colder than it had any right to be. The cold preserved. Cold kept things cooperative. Cold was the difference between art and rot.

Mojave liked it cold.

The light above the workbench buzzed in a faint, tired way, like even electricity wanted to leave him alone. Tools were laid out in clean rows, too intentional to be casual. Blades. Hooks. A spool of thick thread. Jars with labels that only meant something to him. A rag folded neatly.

And in the middle of it all was Atticus. Not powerless, because Atticus had never been powerful. Just... finished. Stripped of his performance. Stripped of his little gentle voice and his *"hello there"* costume and his pretend civility.

Mojave had already removed the parts that lied. What remained was structure.

That was all Atticus ever really deserved.

Mojave worked without haste.

His hands were steady. Almost bored. The kind of precision that came from years of doing a thing until emotion stopped fitting into the muscle memory.

Gut. Cut. Adjust. Pause. Inspect.

He wasn't gentle. But he wasn't sloppy, either. Because the difference mattered.

Because if you were going to take something apart, you did it with respect for the structure, even if you hated the thing you were dismantling. Even if you wanted to see it humiliated.

He shifted his grip, tugged something into place, and the chair legs behind him squeaked a fraction of an inch as he leaned back to check the angle. Satisfied? Not yet. Annoyed? Always.

A dull throb pulsed behind his eyes, not pain exactly, more like pressure, like too many thoughts trying to occupy the same space.

He'd been up all night.

He didn't feel tired.

He felt... offended.

Rowan had slept. Instantly. Like a switch flipped.

Like the moment Mojave gave permission, Rowan dropped. Dead to the world.

As if Mojave hadn't spent eight hours dragging them back from the edge with nothing but spite, coffee, and the kind of vigilance people only reserve for things they claim. As if

Mojave didn't just save the life of someone who didn't fucking deserve it. Someone who almost.. took his life and dared confess relief like a lover.

He should've been relieved too.

He was not a man built for relief.

He was built for control.

Mojave's claws clicked lightly against the table as he set the tool down, then picked up another without looking. His gaze stayed on Atticus's remains, but his brain, unfortunately, kept replaying Rowan's voice. He tried to ignore it. Tried to focus on the task at hand, but just like his tail had, It kept slipping. Skidding. Circling back to the same irritation like a tongue worrying a cracked tooth.

I can't believe I killed an innocent man for you.

I could've left.

I'm no better than Atticus now.

The nerve of it..

The *stupidity* of it.

Mojave's jaw flexed.

He should've left that idiot to rot in the lab. Should've smashed that battery over their head.

He tightened something that did not need tightening, just to have an excuse to apply force.

Rowan had said it like confession. Like penance. Like the kind of disgusting moral theater humans loved. The kind where they made themselves small so they could pretend it meant something.

Mojave couldn't stand it.

Not the guilt, guilt was just noise.

The assumption.

Rowan thought the world still worked like a story.

Like there were clean roles.

Innocent man. Monster cat. Victim hero.

And Rowan... what? The tragic protagonist who made a hard choice and now has to feel appropriately devastated?

He exhaled sharply through his nose and pressed the blade harder than necessary, annoyed at himself for it. Sloppy pressure ruined edges. Ruined preservation. He corrected, slowed, reset his grip.

Focus.

Mojave let out a slow breath through his nose, and it almost sounded like laughter.

He pressed his palm flat against the bench, leaning forward.

“Conformity,” he muttered out loud, just to taste the word. Like chewing something bitter.

That was what it was.

Rowan had spent the whole night chewing on the idea of leaving, of going back to wherever they came from, to their old life, their old rules, their old tidy little labels.

As if they could go back.

As if they could step into “normal” again and not feel it suffocating their throat the first time someone smiled at them on a street corner. As if they could crawl back into the cage and call it home.

Rowan had survived.

That was the point. That was always the point. Mojave had done exactly what was required. Removed the obstruction. Removed the lie. Removed the thing that thought it could categorize and reduce. Atticus had been an infection, nothing more, and Mojave did not regret excising him.

So why.

His jaw tightened.

Why did Rowan have to go and flatten themselves afterward.

That was the word that stuck in his head.

Flatten.

Like a painting scraped off a wall until only primer remained. Like taking something asymmetrical and sanding it smooth because the edges made people uncomfortable.

Mojave’s hands stilled for half a second.

He hated that.

He hated it the way he hated cages. The way he hated labels. The way he hated the slow, smiling violence of “help” and “normal” and “you’ll feel better once—”

Once what?

Once you erase everything that made you you?

Mojave's ears angled back, irritated at his own thoughts.

He didn't do longing.

He did hunger.

He did certainty.

He did the clean pleasure of being right.

And he *was* right.

He was right about Atticus. Right about the masks. Right about the way hope infected a human brain like mold. Right about the way "good people" still did bad things, they just wrapped it in a nicer story so they didn't have to taste it.

He was right about Rowan, too.

Rowan could pretend, but Mojave had watched the change happen. He'd watched it in a hundred tiny moments,

The way Rowan's hands stopped shaking. The way they didn't flinch at the smell anymore. The way they ate and didn't apologize. The way they looked at Atticus, not with horror anymore, but with focus. A coldness that didn't belong to a person who still believed they were "*just passing through*."

Rowan was becoming.

And then Rowan panicked at the edge of it and started looking for the exit again, like they always did.

Like a coward.

Like a *human*.

Mojave's claws dug into the wood hard enough to leave faint grooves.

He hated cowardice.

He hated doubt.

Doubt was the only thing in the world that could make a person betray themselves while still believing they were virtuous for doing it.

Rowan had looked at him that morning with that hollowed-out calm. That quiet compliance. Not fear, worse. Acceptance. The kind people get right before they vanish into systems that promise safety and deliver anesthesia.

You don't need me anymore, that look had said. *I'll be manageable now*.

Mojave's ears flicked back sharply.

Unacceptable.

He dragged the blade free and set it down harder than necessary. Metal clinked against the table, sharp and accusing. The bulb swayed slightly, shadows jerking across the walls like startled animals.

Rowan wasn't supposed to leave like that.

They were supposed to burn. To sharpen. To *become*.

That was the point of survival, not to crawl back into a shape that fit other people's expectations. Not to take the raw, living mess of what they'd endured and package it into something palatable.

Conformity was death.

Mojave knew this. He had always known this. The world punished difference until difference begged to be erased, then called it healing. Called it progress. Called it sanity.

Rowan choosing that, choosing normalcy, felt... obscene.

Mojave..

Mojave probably would've preferred to have found Rowan hanging than see them choose normalcy so willingly.

He turned his head slightly, eyes flicking to the far corner of the basement. He'd built this place into what it needed to be.

A workshop. A sanctuary. A stomach.

His rules. His logic. His truth.

No one thanked him for truth.

They punished it.

They called it sickness.

They called it evil.

They called it *wrong*.

And then they begged for it the moment their pretty little systems failed.

He picked up a tool and resumed working, because the motion kept him from doing something impulsive. Something loud.

The metal made a soft scrape.

Mojave's thoughts sharpened with it.

Rowan had asked for drugs like a dying man asking for water. Rowan had called him a beautiful bastard. Rowan had confessed sloppily and raw and chemically ungarded that Mojave's presence made them feel safe.

Safe.

The word still irritated him, but it also lodged under his ribs in a way he didn't like. Because safety wasn't supposed to exist in his world.

Safety was what people demanded before they tried to take your teeth.

Safety was the leash before the cage.

But Rowan had said it like it was true.

And Mojave.. against his better judgment, had stayed. All night. Supervising. Telling them what was real. What wasn't. Keeping them awake. Keeping them alive.

Not because he was kind.

Because he was right.

Because he refused to let a world that already got everything wrong take Rowan away before Rowan finished becoming what they were.

He swallowed a growl, annoyed at himself for the direction his brain wanted to go.

Because Rowan mattered.

That was the problem.

Not love. Not attachment. Mojave didn't believe in those words the way humans used them.

Attachment was just another form of ownership.

And ownership was practical.

Ownership kept things from wandering.

But Rowan had proven something. Endurance. Adaptability. A refusal to break cleanly. They had survived without becoming hollow until now.

Watching them choose erasure over confrontation felt like betrayal.

Not of him.

Of themselves.

Mojave clicked his tongue sharply, annoyed at the direction of his thoughts. He worked faster for a few minutes, as if speed could outrun thought.

Then he stopped again, tool hovering.

Because the image wouldn't leave him,

Rowan on the couch at sunrise, slumped sideways with one antler gone, mouth slightly open, eyelashes trembling, alive purely because Mojave had decided they were going to be.

Rowan had looked pathetic.

Human.

Breakable.

And Mojave had looked at them too long.

That was the problem.

Not guilt.

Not sympathy.

Curiosity.

The sick fascination of watching someone teeter at the cliff edge of identity and then at the last second, reach for the nearest hand, even if that hand belonged to a monster.

Mojave's fingers flexed.

Rowan had reached for him.

And then Rowan had the audacity to talk about leaving.

Mojave's lip curled.

"Suicide," he whispered, and this time the word wasn't metaphorical.

Because that's what it was, in Mojave's mind.

To crawl back into conformity after you've seen what you are?

To smother your instincts because they're ugly?

To pretend you're "good" again because it's easier for everyone else to stomach?

That was self-murder.

A slow one.

A polite one.

A human one.

Humans always did this.

They survived horror only to sprint back into the nearest cage the moment someone unlocked the door. Called it recovery. Called it closure. Called it “*moving on.*”

As if erasing scars made them braver.

As if forgetting was strength.

He stared down at his work, at the grotesque honesty of it. At the reality that didn’t care how anyone felt about it.

He wasn’t tearing Atticus apart because he was angry.

Anger was childish.

He was doing it because it made sense.

Because it was correct.

Because Atticus had tried to turn a living thing into livestock, and Mojave refused to let that stand unpunished in the universe he controlled.

Mojave blinked slowly, pupils narrowing.

Rowan, though...

Rowan wasn’t trying to control him.

Rowan was trying to control themselves. Trying to put themselves back in a box. Trying to pretend they hadn’t become something sharper. And Mojave couldn’t decide which insulted him more.

That Rowan thought they could leave...

Or that Rowan thought they could leave without him letting them.

He set the tool down.

The sound cracked through the basement like a small gunshot.

Mojave stood there for a long moment, breathing evenly.

He didn’t break down. He didn’t cry. He didn’t punch a wall like some melodramatic idiot trying to convince the world they had feelings.

He just stood in the cold, surrounded by evidence of his own certainty, and felt that rare infuriating sensation of something inside him not lining up cleanly.

Not sadness.

Frustration so sharp it almost tasted metallic. Because the truth was simple,

Rowan was unreliable.

Rowan was disloyal.

Rowan was a creature who kept one foot pointed toward the door like they were still auditioning for a life that ended the moment they met him.

And Mojave.. Mojave hated unreliable things.

He hated the idea of building a world around something that might decide it wanted to be a different person tomorrow. He hated the idea of investing in a thing that could erase itself just to be liked by strangers again.

He stared at the basement door.

Upstairs, Rowan slept.

Probably dreaming.

Probably wiping their own mind clean in that soft, human way that made them think they could wake up new.

Mojave's ears twitched.

He picked up the tool again, because if he didn't keep his hands busy, his mind would start building plans.

And Mojave was very, very good at plans.

He returned to Atticus's carcass with deliberate care, voice low, like he was speaking to the room itself. "You had your cage," he muttered, not to Atticus, not really. "And you still didn't know how to keep what you claimed."

His claws moved with clean precision.

"And I'm not you."

A slower breath.

Then, bitterly, almost amused at how absurd the thought was,

"But gods," he murmured, "Rowan is trying so hard to become you anyway."

The basement light flickered once.

Mojave didn't look up.

He just kept working.

And somewhere between one stitch and the next, his frustration stopped being about Rowan's weakness...

...and became about the simple, offensive possibility that Rowan might actually leave.

Not because Rowan didn't need him.

But because Rowan did.

And still might choose the cage anyway.

And that pissed Mojave off more than anything.

Later that night,

no, later again, when time had gone thin and useless, Rowan continued sleeping.

Not the restless kind. Not the drugged, twitchy half-sleep Mojave had seen humans collapse into before. This was deeper than that. Heavy. Oblivious. The kind of sleep that erased the world so completely it almost looked like death if you didn't know better.

Sixteen hours.

Mojave counted them without meaning to.

He didn't sit with them the whole time. He wasn't sentimental. He had work. He had order to restore. He had Atticus's remains to finish reducing into something honest.

But eventually, his feet inevitably took him upstairs anyway.

He paused in the doorway.

Rowan was sprawled on the couch. One arm hanging off the side. Jaw slack. Bandages stark white against flushed skin. The absence of the antler on one side made their silhouette wrong in a way Mojave hadn't decided how he felt about yet. Asymmetrical. Interrupted. Incomplete.

Alive.

Mojave watched their chest rise and fall. Slow and steady. Human.

All that effort.

All that blood.

And for what?

Mojave's tail stump twitched once.

A bitter resentment crept in. Because he knew how this ended.

Once the other antler came out, Rowan would take the battery. That stupid, ugly little object that had become a symbol it never asked to be. They'd put it in whatever car still remembered how to start, drive back to wherever they came from, and try.. TRY to pretend none of this had rewritten them down to the bone.

They'd tell themselves it was over.

They'd call it survival.

They'd flatten themselves again.

Mojave's jaw tightened.

What a waste.

Time was a resource. Attention was a resource. Potential was a resource. Mojave did not squander resources. Waste was sin. Waste was decay. Waste was the kind of moral rot humans pretended to hate while producing it endlessly.

And Rowan..

Rowan had been promising.

That was the insult of it.

They had endured. They had adapted. They had learned. They had looked at horror and not blinked first. Mojave had seen it. He knew it. He did not misjudge things like this. Trying to make someone your equal was not charity. It was investment.

And investments were not meant to walk away.

Mojave stepped closer, quiet enough that even a lighter sleeper wouldn't have stirred. He looked down at Rowan's face, soft now, stripped of panic and pain and the constant human need to decide what they were allowed to feel.

He hated how human they looked like this. He hated how easy it was to forget the sharpness underneath when they slept. He hated the thought that once he helped them finish this, once the second antler was gone, Rowan would take that softness and mistake it for healing.

He flexed his claws, restrained the urge to touch anything. Ownership was not expressed through tenderness. Ownership was expressed through action.

Still.

Rowan was potential.

Raw, unpolished, but undeniable. They'd crossed lines most people never even approached. They'd learned him. Their hands didn't shake anymore. Their eyes didn't flinch the way they used to. They ate meat without breaking.

Cold blood ran in them now, whether they liked it or not.

And Mojave knew it.

That was the worst part.

Rowan kept clinging to their soft little morals like they were life preservers, pretending they weren't already drowning in the same dark water. Pretending this was all temporary. Transactional. Battery in, blood out.

Pathetic.

They could have been extraordinary.

The two of them could have been devastating together. A matched set, hunter and hunter, not handler and stray.

Instead, Rowan would leave.

And Mojave would be left with the echo of what could've been, rotting like a carcass he chose not to claim.

He stepped closer to the couch, looming over Rowan's sleeping form. For a brief ugly moment, he considered waking them. Shaking them until they looked at him with those sharp, defiant eyes again. Saying it outright.

Stay. Choose this. *Choose me.*

The thought made his stomach twist with something dangerously close to disgust.

He turned away sharply.

Do you have any idea how long it for someone to learn me?

He wasn't lonely. He wasn't sentimental. He didn't need anyone. Still... his gaze drifted back despite himself.

Rowan shifted slightly in their sleep, mumbling something unintelligible, fingers curling into the fabric beneath them like they were anchoring themselves.

Something in his chest pulled tight, unpleasant and unfamiliar.

All this, he thought.

All this will be for nothing.

Mojave straightened.

Fine.

If Rowan wanted to leave, then at least they would leave complete. Not half-claimed. Not still straddling the line between what they were and what they pretended they wanted to be.

Mojave had never been gentle with things that mattered. He decided enough was enough.

He reached out and gripped Rowan's shoulder, not roughly, but firmly enough that it wasn't a suggestion.

"Up," he said.

Rowan made a miserable sound that barely qualified as human. Something between a groan and a whine. Their body tried to roll, and immediately stopped, stiff and sore, breath hitching.

"...*What*," they croaked.

Mojave didn't repeat himself. He reached out and flicked the remaining antler lightly with a claw.

Rowan yelped, jolting awake so hard their vision swam. "Fuck—! What is wrong with you?!"

Mojave straightened. "It's time."

Rowan blinked once. Twice. Their eyes struggled to focus, pupils blown wide from sleep, confusion settling in before memory caught up.

"Wh—?" They swallowed thickly. "Is it—what time—?"

Mojave didn't soften it. He never did.

"The other one."

Rowan went quiet.

That did it.

Their throat bobbed. They licked their lips, suddenly too aware of their own pulse.

"...*Now*?" they asked quietly.

"Yes."

Rowan exhaled, long and shaky. "I just woke up."

"You slept long enough," Mojave said. "Longer than I expected."

That was not reassurance.

Rowan's stomach dropped so fast they actually thought they might black out again. Their hand flew to the remaining antler instinctively, fingers trembling as soon as they touched it.

"No," they whispered. Then, louder, weakly. "I—I don't think I can do that again."

Mojave watched them carefully now. Not mocking. Not amused. Assessing.

"You survived the first," he said.

"I barely did," Rowan shot back. Their voice cracked. "I passed out. I puked. My head feels like it's splitting in half. Mojave, I—" They sucked in a shaky breath. "I don't think I'll survive another one."

Silence stretched for a long moment. Outside, an owl called. Somewhere far off, something howled.

Mojave exhaled slowly through his nose. "You will."

Rowan laughed weakly. It sounded wrong. Thin. "You're very confident about that for someone who isn't the one getting pieces ripped out of their skull."

Mojave stepped closer, looming over the couch. "If we leave it," he said, calm and cold, "it gets infected. Or it loosens wrong. Or you hit it in your sleep and bleed out before morning. You want to roll those dice?"

Rowan didn't answer.

Their throat worked as they swallowed again. Their hands shook openly now, no effort made to hide it.

"...I'm scared," they admitted quietly.

That finally gave Mojave pause.

Not because fear was unusual, but because Rowan almost never said it out loud.

He crouched slightly so they were closer to eye level. His ears flicked back once. "Good," he said. "Means you're still thinking."

Rowan stared at him, incredulous. "That's your comfort speech?"

Mojave's grip tightened slightly. "Have I ever let something I invested in break?"

That wasn't comforting.

But it was honest.

He stepped back, giving Rowan space to stand or fail to. Either way, this was happening. "Come on," Mojave said, already turning toward the basement stairs. "We finish this

tonight.”

Rowan hesitated for half a second longer.

Then they pushed themselves up, swayed, steadied, and followed.

Mojave did not look back.

He didn’t need to.

Rowan was coming.

And whether Rowan stayed afterward or not, whether they ran back to their cage clutching that battery like a holy relic, Mojave would not allow them to leave unfinished.

Waste was sin.

And Mojave did not tolerate sin.

The basement swallowed them the moment they stepped down.

Upstairs had at least pretended to be a house with a couch, some old shitty TV with no channels and stale coffee, the illusion of normal. Down here it was honest. Cold air. Metal. The smell of something macerating and rotting. The workbench waiting like an altar that didn’t care what you believed in.

Rowan’s feet hit the concrete and their stomach immediately tried to climb out of their throat.

They didn’t want to sit.

They did anyway.

Perched on the edge of the bench with their hands braced behind them, shoulders rigid, bandages still clinging to their scalp. Their remaining antler throbbed with a pulse that didn’t feel like blood, more like warning. Like the bone knew what was coming and was begging to be spared.

Mojave didn’t waste time.

He moved with that infuriating calm he always wore when something mattered. He lit a lamp, dragged the metal tray closer, and started disinfecting tools like he was prepping vegetables. The little clink of steel against steel. Gloves, alcohol, a rag.

Unbothered, like Rowan wasn’t about to experience the most skull shattering pain known to man.

Rowan watched him with wide, exhausted eyes.

“You’re going to do it fast,” Rowan said, voice half question, half plea. “Right?”

Mojave didn’t look up. “Yes.”

Rowan's fingers dug into the edge of the bench. "Like you said."

"Like I said."

Rowan swallowed, throat clicking. "Okay."

Mojave finally glanced up, his expression unreadable. "Once the stitching is loose," he said, "I rip it out. Quick. Like a bandage. You want it over, I want it over."

Rowan nodded too hard and immediately regretted it. A hiss tore out of them. "Okay—okay. Just—don't—"

"Don't what?" Mojave asked to fast, too irritated.

Rowan's mouth trembled, perplexed by his reaction but deciding to say nothing at all.

For a moment, Mojave just stared.

Then he leaned in. "Hold still."

Rowan shakily nodded.

Mojave's hands came up, firm on their shoulders, anchoring them in place. The same hands that had kept them alive. The same hands that had dragged them into hell. That had pushed them down underwater. Rowan didn't know which memory to listen to, so their body chose the oldest one and shook like a cornered animal.

Mojave started.

The first snip was a sound Rowan felt more than heard, so tiny, like a pinch, but the pain that followed didn't match the sound. It bloomed hot and immediate, like someone poured salt into a fresh wound and stirred.

Rowan's back arched. A gasp ripped out of them.

"FUCK—"

"stay still," Mojave muttered, like he had the audacity to be annoyed.

Rowan barked a laugh that turned into a strangled whine when Mojave tugged another stitch free.

"Oh my god—*oh my god*—" Rowan panted, eyes watering, sweat beading instantly along their hairline. "I can feel it—"

"I know," Mojave said.

He worked through the stitches with brutal patience. Every pull sent a lightning strike through Rowan's skull. Blood welled and started to run down their temple in thin lines that made Rowan nauseous just from imagining it.

Their hands scrabbled for something to grab. The bench. The edge. Their own thighs. Anything that wasn't their head.

Mojave's grip on their shoulders tightened.

"Stay," he snapped again.

Rowan choked. "I'm—trying—"

The stitching loosened.

Rowan knew it without being told. The pressure changed. The antler felt less attached and more lodged. Like something jammed in a wound waiting for someone cruel enough to remove it.

Mojave leaned back, assessing his work.

Rowan's chest heaved. Their vision had started to swim at the edges.

"Okay," Mojave said. "Now. On three."

Rowan's eyes snapped up, panic flaring. "Wait—wait—"

"You said you wanted it fast."

Rowan's lips parted. Their throat worked. Then they nodded, because what else could they do.

"Okay," Rowan whispered. "*Okay. Fast.*"

Mojave moved his hand onto Rowan's shoulder, the other around the base of the antler.

Rowan's whole body went rigid.

"On three," Mojave repeated, voice strangely calm.

Rowan squeezed their eyes shut. "Just—do it."

Mojave counted.

"One."

Rowan inhaled.

"Two."

Rowan's fingernails dug into the bench so hard they thought they'd crack.

"*Three.*"

And...

Nothing.

No yank. No fast and quick rip like a bandaid.

Rowan blinked hard, confused, still bracing for a pain that didn't arrive on schedule.

"What—" Rowan rasped. "Do it—"

Mojave didn't answer.

Rowan felt his hands tighten. Not a jerk.

Just when Rowan thought he'd yank the antler out, instead, Mojave began to pull.. slowly.. an agonizing deliberate grind that rattled Rowan's skull.

Rowan's breath hitched so violently it turned into a scream.

"AH—FUCK—MOJAVE—!"

The pain wasn't a single strike.

It was a grind.

A dragging, tearing pressure that made Rowan's teeth chatter. The antler shifted millimeter by millimeter and every tiny movement sent a wave of agony through their skull, like their brain was being peeled from the inside.

Rowan clawed at the bench, sobbing instantly.

"WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING?!" they screamed, voice cracking. "YOU SAID—YOU SAID FAST—!"

Mojave's mouth was close to their ear. Too close.

"You want *honesty*?" he murmured.

Rowan gasped, choking on air, choking on tears, choking on the sudden understanding that slammed into them like a door.

This wasn't about removing anything.

This was punishment.

"Mojave—please—" Rowan begged, pathetic and furious at once, "STOP—STOP—YOU'RE HURTING ME—!"

Mojave pulled another inch.

Rowan's scream snapped into a broken animal yowl, raw and unpretty. Their legs kicked, heel scraping the concrete. Their hands flailed, but they couldn't touch their own head, couldn't risk it, so they just shook and sobbed, trapped in their own body.

Mojave's voice came again, low as a confession.

"Feel that?"

"Mojave—PLEASE—" They made a raw, shaking noise and tried to jerk away, but Mojave's hand slammed down on their shoulder, pinning them in place with a blunt unyielding force.

"DON'T MOVE," he snapped.

Rowan screamed again louder, voice shredding on the way out. Their throat burned. Their stomach lurched. Ugly tears spilled hard and fast, the kind that came with snot and humiliation, bile raising all over again.

"Mojave!" Rowan sobbed, choking on the name like it was both prayer and curse. "WHY—WHY ARE YOU *DOING THIS*—!?"

Mojave's grip didn't soften.

He pulled slowly, mercilessly, like he was extracting something more than bone.

"*This*," he murmured, "is the part people run from."

Rowan gagged on a breath, trembling so hard the bench rattled. "M-Mojave—PLEASE! I-I'm.. I'M SORRY—P-PLEASE—"

Mojave exhaled through his nose, almost a laugh, almost a snarl. "It hurt like this," he said quietly, "when I ate my own tail."

Rowan choked, horror mixing with pain. "What—what.. THE FUCK—"

"Slow," Mojave continued, voice steady and intimately cruel. "Unmerciful. Flesh doesn't let go politely. Bone doesn't forgive. That's where innocence lived."

Rowan's sob turned into a desperate, incoherent sound. "Mojave—please—PLEASE—"

Mojave pulled again. Rowan screamed again. "I said STOP MOVING." He growled.

Rowan cried through it anyway, like Mojave was background noise and pain was the only language left.

Mojave stared at them as if weighing something. Not pity. Not regret. Something colder. Something tired.

"I know," he muttered, low. "You're tired."

Rowan's breath hitched, eyes glassy, staring at him through blood that slid down their temple and collected in the inner corner of their eye, mixing with tears they kept blinking away in frantic little motions.

Mojave watched it.

Watched them.

Then his jaw tightened.

“Well,” he said, voice flat, “*I’m tired too.*”

Rowan’s throat worked, trying to form words, trying to form anything that could make this stop.

Mojave leaned in again, voice soft enough to be gentle, almost.

“That day,” Mojave continued, murmuring softly, “I stopped being... what the world wanted me to be.”

Rowan’s tears poured down their face. Their hands shook so violently they slid off the bench and caught themselves again, palms smearing with blood.

Mojave’s voice sharpened, and it finally finally turned back to Rowan.

“And this,” he whispered, “is *yours.*”

Rowan’s whole body convulsed. “I CAN’T—I CAN’T—”

“*Yes* you can,” Mojave said, suddenly harsh. “You’ve been doing it. Every hunt. Every lie you told yourself to make it easier to swallow.”

Rowan screamed as another slow inch came free. “I DID IT FOR THE BATTERY—”

Mojave’s voice snapped like a whip.

Offended that Rowan was still persistent with that lie.

“*No.*”

Rowan’s sob hitched.

Mojave leaned closer, words cutting and quiet.

“You could’ve been *perfect*,” he hissed. “If you would just stop running from yourself. If you would just be honest with yourself for once in your life.”

Rowan shook their head helplessly, their face contorted in pain. “I’M TRYING—”

“No,” Mojave said again. “You’re performing.”

Rowan screamed as the pressure changed again, like something finally loosening, finally surrendering.

Mojave’s breath was hot in their ear.

“You can wear innocence all you want,” he murmured. “You can wrap it around yourself like a blanket and call it morality.. call it ‘*I’m not like you*,’ Like Atticus did. Like every human does—”

Rowan’s voice broke into ragged sobs. “Please—stop—”

Mojave continued, relentless. “Like.. like i-it’ll save you.. Like it makes you BETTER.”

Mojave’s grip tightened.

“But this..” he whispered, “is who you are.”

Rowan sobbed, begging now, words collapsing into nonsense.

“Please—please—please—”

Mojave’s hand paused.

Rowan gasped, trembling, head lolling forward for half a second like they’d been granted oxygen.

And then

Not slow.

Not merciful.

A final, *brutal yank*.

Rowan’s whole body jolted forward like their spine had been cut. Their hands slipped. Their knees buckled. They slid off the bench and hit the floor hard, landing in a slick, shaking collapse.

The world went white. Then black. Then back again in a pulsing blur.

Rowan’s scream dissolved into strangled wet sobbing, humiliating. Their forehead pressed to the concrete. Their hands clutched at nothing. They panted like they’d been drowned and dragged back up.

Mojave stood over them, chest rising and falling heavier than it should’ve been.

For a second, he just watched.

Then he looked away like the sight offended him.

The antler hit the floor with a dull clack.

Mojave turned sharply to the bench, snatched bandages and supplies, and hurled them down in front of Rowan. Gauze. Tape. A roll that bounced once and rolled to a stop against Rowan’s trembling hand.

“Patch yourself up,” Mojave said.

Rowan couldn’t even lift their head. They sobbed into the concrete, shaking so hard their teeth clicked.

Mojave’s voice came again, colder now. Emptier. He pointed. Rowan saw the motion through the blur, the direction.

The shelf.

The car battery. That stupid prize. The holy object. The thing that had been the excuse for every sin, sitting there like an artifact from a religion Rowan no longer believed in.

“Take it,” Mojave said. “And get out.”

Rowan tried to inhale. It came out as a hitching sob.

“Mojave—” Rowan rasped.

“No,” he cut in, and the way he said it was final. Clean. Like a door locking.

Rowan’s shoulders shook harder.

Mojave didn’t look at them.

His ears flicked back once, irritated.

“You’re a disappointment,” he said, and his voice wasn’t loud, it wasn’t even angry in the way humans understood anger.

It was worse.

It was final.

“All that potential,” Mojave continued, staring at nothing, “You want to keep one foot in my world and one foot in your cage. You want to call yourself good while you do bad things and cry about it afterward like that makes you different.. I gave you truth, and you treated it like a disease..”

Rowan’s shoulders shook. Their hands finally moved, clumsily grabbing at the bandages like a drowning person grabbing at rope, desperate.

Mojave’s jaw tightened.

“You *wasted* my time,” he said.

Rowan made a broken sound.

Mojave paused.

And then he looked away, like seeing Rowan's face was too much, or too irritating, or too human. When he spoke again, it was quieter. Almost careful. Like he wanted the words to land exactly where they'd hurt most.

"I never want to see you again," he said.

Rowan went still for half a heartbeat, like even their sobbing forgot what to do.

Mojave's eyes stayed forward. Refusing.

"I don't want to know where you go.."

...

"What you become."

"How you are."

...

"Nothing."

A final, brutal line.

The last word that will ever be exchanged between them. A word of no prospect of progress. Of value. A devoid of potential and feeling.

Simply..

Nothing.

Rowan stared up at him through tears, through blood-heat and dizziness, trying to find the lie in his face.

Mojave didn't give them one.

Rowan's breath hitched. A fresh wave of tears came, hotter than the pain.

Mojave turned toward the stairs.

He didn't even spare Rowan a final look.

Rowan tried to call his name again, but no sound came out, just a broken sob. And they weren't even sure whether it was still over the antlers anymore.

They watched Mojave disappear at the top of the stairs, the light from above cutting a thin line around his silhouette for half a second.

Then he was gone.

Rowan's chest caved inward.

They curled down onto the cold concrete, clutching themselves like they could hold their insides together, shaking so hard their teeth clicked.

And in the quiet Mojave left behind, the leftover silence of shame, of unconsensual longing, the finality of connection, Rowan realized the worst part wasn't the pain in their skull.

It was the space where Mojave's presence used to be.

A hole that felt like it had always been there.

And now it was empty.

They'd finally gotten what they wanted.

And it cost them everything anyway.

Rowan stayed on the basement floor long enough for the blood to cool into tacky skin.

Long enough for the sobbing to stop being loud and start being natural. That ugly little body function that keeps happening after the reason is gone. Long enough for their throat to go raw and their eyes to feel like sandpaper. Long enough for the silence to settle into the shape Mojave left behind, and for Rowan to realize the silence wasn't relief.

It was abandonment with the volume turned down.

Eventually, the body did what bodies do when the mind can't decide anything anymore. It stood up.

Not heroically.

Not in the same way a man rose in war to keep fighting, no, the way a man rose in defeat. Acceptance. To walk away from everything that made them whole.

Rowan pushed up on shaking hands and nearly slid right back down, boots skidding on blood like ice. Their fingers splayed, catching the edge of the workbench. The room tipped. Their stomach lurched. Their head throbbed with a dull distant ache, nothing like before, not even close.

Now it was the mind that hurt.

The body was just... a carrier.

Rowan blinked hard, wiped their face with a sleeve already ruined, and grabbed the scattered supplies Mojave had thrown like scraps to a dog. They shoved it all into their jacket pockets with stiff angry motions, like if they moved fast enough they wouldn't have to feel what they were doing.

Didn't even bother wrapping their head properly yet. There would be time for that later. Or there wouldn't. Either way, it didn't matter right now.

Then their eyes lifted.

The shelf.

The battery.

That stupid holy relic.

The thing that had been used to translate atrocity into a mission.

Rowan stared at it and waited for something again, relief, for something to rise up and give meaning to the weight of it.

Nothing did.

The battery was just a block of metal and acid and plastic. It didn't glow. It didn't sing. It didn't apologize.

Rowan picked it up anyway.

It was heavier than they expected. Not physically. It felt like lifting the summary of everything that had happened, every cut, every scream, every hunt, and realizing it still couldn't balance the scale. This was the object. The justification. The altar piece. The thing they had explained everything with, over and over again, until explanation felt like truth.

Rowan limped up the basement stairs with it cradled against their chest, one hand on the railing like an old person, like someone who had already lived too long.

Each step felt like a small stupid metaphor, climbing out of hell, climbing toward salvation, climbing toward "*home*."

Except heaven wasn't waiting at the top.

Just the living room.

And it looked different now.

Not because anything had moved. The furniture was the same. The air was the same stale desert-dry. But the meaning was gone. The house had become a museum of violence and Rowan had become the tour guide who couldn't remember why the exhibits mattered.

A red hue poured across the walls as the sun angled low, bleeding through the curtain edges like the house was blushing for what it contained. The TV threw red light too, static turned crimson, as if the screen had gotten bored of pretending to be empty. Like a gore-stained window into nothing at all.

Rowan didn't even flinch.

Hallucinations had taught them a crucial lesson, the mind will show you anything. The only question is whether you still care.

They walked past the dining room first, because the house insisted on making them pass their sins, like a gauntlet.

Mounted heads watched from the walls. Jane Doe and John Doe and little John Jr., preserved and displayed like trophies from a war that never had a reason. Jane's glass eyes still had that pleading look, that delusion that there had been a version of this where she could've been saved by a stranger's hope.

John's jaw hung in eternal drunken fury, forever stuck in the moment he tried to protect his family and failed. Rage mistaken for protection. Violence mistaken for love.

And John Jr...

John Jr. was the worst because he had not been a symbol. He had been a *child*. A soft body that didn't know how to be brave, that only knew how to suffer. Too small. His skull mounted higher than it should've been, as if elevation could undo the way he'd screamed while his mother tried to shield him with her own body.

Rowan kept walking anyway.

The mind does a thing after enough trauma, it begins to treat horror like weather. You stop reacting to it, not because it's acceptable, but because reacting doesn't change anything. The nervous system can only scream for so long before it goes hoarse.

That's what conditioning is, really.

Not just learning.

Learning is gentle. Conditioning is a leash.

Conditioning is when your body starts obeying a world you hate because obedience hurts less than resistance.

Rowan passed the kitchen.

Atticus's head sat on the counter, one eye ruined, one eye dull and empty, feathers matted with dried blood. The owl who taught Rowan what it felt like to be reduced to "livestock." The owl who carved hatred into them like a ritual. The thing that violated their body and then asked why they cried.

Rowan looked at him and felt... nothing.

Not forgiveness. Not closure. Just the dead neutrality of someone whose brain had used up all its outrage budget.

That was another psychological cruelty, too, when your capacity to feel disgust gets exhausted. When your moral reflexes stop firing because they've been activated too many

times without reward.

Rowan kept moving.

Down the hall, Lila's body still hung pierced to the wall, knives like exclamation marks. The most innocent creature Rowan had met in the desert. The one who had just wanted to bring medicine to her grandmother. The one Mojave had decided needed to die because attachment was dangerous. The rabbit who made the mistake of being kind in a place that treated kindness as a liability.

Rowan had finished that job.

Rowan walked past her too.

Not because Lila didn't matter.

Because if Rowan stopped now, they'd collapse, and there was no one left to tell them what was real.

Trauma doesn't always make people scream or flinch. Sometimes it teaches them stillness. Sometimes it teaches them absence. And sometimes, it teaches them to reach for the door even when all humanity is lost.

Their hand settled on the knob.

And for a second, just a second, they braced for the world outside to punish them. To demand one more price. To make leaving impossible.

But when they opened the door...

[Untitled #9 - Smáskifa 1](#)

It was quiet.

The desert was... beautiful.

That was the cruelest part.

The sky was drenched in orange, an ethereal glow spreading over sand and scrub and distant rock like the world had decided to look holy for once. The air was neither warm nor cold, hovering in that calm middle temperature that makes your skin feel unreal. Even the wind had softened, as if it didn't want to disturb anything. The kind of evening that made people believe in meaning.

Freedom stood there like a painting.

And Rowan stepped into it.

And felt nothing.

That was the tragedy. Freedom didn't feel like freedom. It felt like a room they'd been allowed into, but didn't have the language to live in anymore.

They started down the pathway they'd walked in on, limping slightly, battery held close.

Behind them, the house didn't make a sound. No music. No lecture. No sharp voice yanking them back.

For a few seconds Rowan believed, stupidly, that Mojave might actually let them go. That it could end like a story ends. That there could be an exit without punishment.

Then they felt it.

A presence.

Rowan stopped without meaning to, the way prey stops when the air changes. They didn't turn immediately. Their shoulder rose just slightly. Their grip tightened on the battery. Their tongue pressed hard to the back of their teeth as if bracing for impact.

Then they turned.

Mojave stood beside the house.

Just... there.

Far enough away to make it clear this wasn't a chase. He was still spattered with Rowan's blood like an ugly signature. A cleaver hung in his hand, as if it weighed no more than a spoon. His posture was loose, but the looseness was deceptive, the way a cat looks relaxed right before it decides to pounce.

Rowan's eyes met his.

And their face did something strange.

Not anger. Not pleading.

Something in between the expression you make when you discover the thing you feared most has already happened and all you can do now is continue living inside it.

Mojave didn't move.

But his gaze did, slowly.

It slid over Rowan's bandages.

Over the wounds where antlers used to be.

The battery held like an infant.

The way Rowan stood as if their bones had been rearranged.

Rowan stared back.

They stared at each other across the distance like two planets that had collided and now drifted apart on opposite orbits, still gravitationally entangled.

Rowan waited for him to do it.

To lunge. To end it. To decide that “letting go” was a lie he didn’t tell.

But Mojave stayed where he was, watching.

Because Mojave was honest.

Honest in the way gravity is honest. It doesn’t hate you. It doesn’t love you. It just works.

They stared at each other.

No words.

there was no clear pattern now.

No demand.

Just the stare of something that had owned you long enough to recognize the silhouette of your leaving.

Rowan’s throat flexed.

A swallow that didn’t move anything down.

Their eyes dropped, not in submission, not exactly, but in exhaustion. Like their pupils were too tired to hold Mojave’s gaze for longer than a few seconds without remembering everything.

Then Rowan turned away again and walked.

The blood trail they’d followed at the beginning was still there, dark smears in the sand like the desert remembered. Rowan followed it, not because it guided them, but because it was the only path that had ever made sense in this place. The only story the ground could tell.

Mojave followed at a distance.

Not close. Not threatening.

Just present.

Like he was escorting Rowan out.

Or like he was making sure the world saw who belonged to who, even in departure. Like a shadow unsure whether it belonged to the object that cast it.

Rowan kept their eyes forward.

But their body knew he was there anyway. Their spine stayed tight. Their shoulders stayed lifted like armor. Their breath stayed shallow, waiting for the moment the cleaver decided to become an ending.

Nothing happened.

And the nothing was heavier than violence.

Because violence would have at least been simple.

Psychology has a word for what Rowan felt then, though it never sounds poetic when you say it aloud.

Psychology calls it conditioning.

When pain and relief come from the same source, the brain binds them together. When fear is consistently followed by safety, especially intermittent safety, it creates attachment stronger than kindness ever could. The nervous system doesn't care about morality. It cares about patterns.

Rowan had learned Mojave.

Learned the rhythm of his cruelty. Learned the rare, surgical mercy. Learned how to survive inside his logic.

And once you've been trained like that, freedom feels suspicious.

Because freedom has no pattern.

And the nervous system worshipped patterns.

And Mojave had been a pattern.

Pain, then relief. Threat, then shelter. Hunger, then reward. Terror, then that rare, brutal mercy.

Intermittent reinforcement, psychology's most efficient hook. The kind that makes gamblers ruin their lives. The kind that makes victims stay. The kind that turns a person into a dog that flinches but still comes when called, because sometimes the hand that hits you is also the hand that *feeds* you.

Rowan didn't think that in textbook words.

They thought it in something closer to prayer.

I learned your footsteps the way people learn songs.

I learned your silences the way you learn weather.

I learned the shape of safety from the shape of your teeth.

I learned to call it love because my mouth needed a word.

I learned to call it home because terror is lonely.

And loneliness is a hunger I would rather die than feel again.

Their head ached, a dull distant pulse now. The wound was real, but it wasn't the point anymore. The ache in their skull was almost comforting in its simplicity, a pain with a location, a pain with a cause.

The real injury was invisible.

It lived in the way Rowan kept waiting for punishment even as the world stayed gentle.

It lived in the way the beauty of the sunset felt like mockery. The pain in their skull was nothing compared to the conflict in their mind, the constant, quiet war between

Leave.

and

Go back.

Conditioning doesn't feel like a chain. It feels like a thought you think is your own.

For the first time, Rowan understood what Mojave meant when he talked about stripping flaws away. Conditioning didn't erase identity, it rewrote it. The self reorganized around survival. Morality became contextual. Hope became dangerous. Choice became a calculation of which pain was tolerable.

Rowan didn't look at the sky anymore. The sunset could have been the most beautiful thing in the universe and it still would've felt like a lie, because beauty only matters if you can feel it.

Rowan kept walking until the road appeared.

The place where this started

The "do not enter" sign still hung crookedly. It was laughable, like a warning label on a life that had already been consumed.

Rowan pushed the gate open into the road.

The hinges whined like they were protesting.

Rowan stepped through.

Mojave remained behind, still watching.

They paused. Looked back.

Mojave stood behind the fence line, not crossing, The cleaver caught the light and looked like a thin, bright cross. His face in the sunset looked almost mythic, which was obscene. The light turned him into something cinematic, something you could put in a story and call symbolic. A saint if saints were built out of hunger and certainty and the conviction that everyone else is wrong.

Rowan hated that their brain still tried to romanticize him.

They hated it the way you hate a reflex you can't stop.

Rowan held the second gate open, and then they stopped. Their fingers closed around the metal.

And for a moment, they didn't shut it.

They just held it there, open, breathing.

Feeling Mojave's gaze on them like a hand.

Then Rowan softly pulled the gate closed.

Metal met metal, a small, final sound.

No words.

Not loud.

But definitive.

A small act of separation, mundane enough to be cruel.

And in that tiny final action, so quiet, so mundane, Rowan watched Mojave's hand tighten around the cleaver.

A small tell.

A twitch of something inside him.

Not grief.

Not tears.

Possession reacting to separation.

To the idea of not being able to reach. Not anymore. Reaction to losing something Mojave had invested so long on.

Rowan watched it, the small micro-tell, the tiny betrayal of control, and felt something in their chest go hollow in a way that almost resembled satisfaction, until they realized it wasn't

satisfaction.

It was numbness wearing a mask.

Rowan almost couldn't believe they'd made it this far without being stopped.

That was the sick part. Part of them had expected Mojave to refuse reality. To rewrite it with violence. Mojave was the type to treat endings as negotiations.

But he didn't move.

Rowan turned away and walked down the road.

Their car was still there.

Shockingly.

Like the universe had preserved it as a punchline.

It was sun-bleached, baked in heat on the side of the road, abandoned-looking, like it had been sitting through an apocalypse and nobody bothered to tell it the world continued. Rowan approached it slowly, as if the car might not be real. As if "home" might not exist anymore.

They popped the hood.

Their hands moved with automatic competence, muscle memory from a life that used to be normal. Disconnect. Replace. Tighten. The battery slid into place with a heavy, final clunk.

That sound was the loudest thing in Rowan's world.

Because it was proof that the quest had been real.

Proof that the reward existed.

And proof that the reward meant nothing.

It felt like the universe shrugging.

The entire nightmare had been built around something ordinary.

A block of metal.

A replacement part.

A prize that didn't carry meaning, only the meaning they'd bled into it.

Rowan closed the hood.

Rowan stood there a moment, hands on the edge of the hood, breathing shallow. They looked back one last time.

Mojave was still there behind the gate, watching from afar, unmoving, the cleaver hanging at his side like an extension.

A predator watching a door close.

Rowan held his gaze for one long second.

No anger. No pleading. No farewell.

Just a stare that said, *I am leaving with your fingerprints on my soul.*

Because there were no words that wouldn't be a lie.

Rowan lowered their gaze, got into the car, and shut the door.

The car smelled like old fabric and dust and the faint ghost of who they used to be. Rowan gripped the steering wheel with both hands and sat perfectly still.

Not crying.

Just... empty.

A person can go through so much terror that their emotions stop arriving on time. They show up late, if they show up at all. The brain, trying to protect itself, pulls the plug on feeling because feeling would kill you faster than the wound.

Rowan's knuckles whitened on the wheel.

The psychology textbooks would say Rowan was experiencing dissociation, the mind stepping back from itself, reality flattening into something distant and unreal. After prolonged trauma, the brain sometimes chooses numbness over pain, emptiness over terror.

They stared through the windshield at the road stretching ahead into shimmering heat-haze and orange light.

And the strangest thought, flat and hollow, passed through them like wind through an abandoned house..

I got what I wanted.

The next thought came right after, quieter, worse,

So why does it feel like I died anyway?

Outside, Mojave remained behind the gate, watching.

Inside, Rowan sat in silence, hands locked to the wheel like they were holding themselves together.

And for a long time.. too long.. Rowan didn't turn the car on.

Because starting the engine meant admitting there was an “after.”

And Rowan sat there, hollow and breathing, learning slowly, painfully, that sometimes the most devastating ending isn’t death.

It was the quiet realization that survival had not returned them to life.

It had only returned them to motion.

Rowan sat there longer than made sense.

Hands still on the wheel.

Engine silent.

Desert humming softly outside like it didn’t know it had just ruined someone.

The keys lay in the ignition, dull metal catching the sunrise in a way that felt accusatory. They hadn’t touched them yet. Hadn’t decided anything yet. The car was ready, patient, offering escape without insisting on it.

This was the most dangerous moment.

Because this was the moment where nothing was happening.

Where no one was forcing them.

Where no one was threatening them.

Where the choice was finally, *horribly* theirs.

Rowan’s chest rose and fell shallowly. Their head throbbed, not sharply anymore, just a constant reminder, like a low-grade alarm that had been ringing for so long their brain had stopped reacting to it. The world felt far away. Flattened. Like everything had been pressed between glass.

They stared through the windshield at the road stretching forward.

Then, without meaning to, they glanced to the side.

The desert mountains stood there in the distance, dark against the glowing sky. And in front of it, near the fence line,

Mojave.

Still there.

Still watching.

He hadn’t moved. Hadn’t followed. Hadn’t turned away either. He stood like something carved into the desert itself, a fixture rather than a creature, cleaver hanging uselessly at his

side. His posture was unreadable, but Rowan knew him well enough now to recognize the stillness for what it was.

Waiting.

Not chasing.

Not calling.

Waiting.

And something inside Rowan shifted.

Not loudly.

Just enough.

Their fingers twitched on the wheel.

A thought rose, soft, seductive, poisonous in how reasonable it sounded.

You could get out.

You could walk back.

You could stop pretending you want a life that will never fit you again.

You already know how to survive there.

You already know his rules.

You already know what he expects of you.

You don't have to be confused there.

You don't have to choose anymore.

Rowan imagined it.

Opening the door.

Leaving the car.

Walking back down the road like nothing had changed.

They imagined Mojave's attention sharpening.

The way his gaze would hook.

The way certainty would slide back into place.

They imagined the relief of structure.

Of being told what they were.

Of not having to carry the weight of deciding who they should be.

They imagined becoming what Mojave wanted them to be.

A life with no ambiguity.

No guilt.

No soft moral questions that never had answers anyway.

A life where pain had meaning.

Rowan's throat tightened.

Because the most terrifying thing was this,

Part of them wanted it.

Not because it was good.

But because it was familiar.

The brain clings to what it knows, even when what it knows is poison. Conditioning does that. It convinces you that suffering with rules is safer than freedom without them. It teaches you that chaos is more frightening than cruelty, because cruelty, at least, is predictable.

Rowan had learned Mojave.

Learned his gravity.

Learned the way his certainty could swallow doubt whole. Learned how easy it would be to disappear into him.

And disappear is the word that mattered.

..You don't have to become anything.

You can just... stop..

Stop resisting...

Stop being torn.

Stop trying to be good.

Stop trying to be *anything* at all.

"Choose me"

Mojave had said.

Rowan's hand hovered near the door handle.

For a moment, just a moment, it really did feel like they might get out.

Behind the fence line, Mojave's ears angled forward. Subtle. Hopeful, in his own way.

Even he seemed to be waiting for it. Like he expected it.

Waiting for Rowan to prove him right.

Rowan closed their eyes.

And something else surfaced beneath the noise. Quieter. Colder. Less persuasive.

A memory, not of Mojave, not of Atticus, not of blood or knives or cages. A memory of who they were before the conditioning fully took hold.

Not innocent.

Not heroic.

Just... unfinished.

If I go back,

I won't be choosing him.

I'll be choosing not to choose at all.

I'll be choosing erasure over uncertainty.

I'll be choosing the cage because the open field scares me more than the bars ever did.

Rowan opened their eyes.

The road ahead shimmered in the heat.

The road behind held a certainty that would never ask them who they wanted to be, only what they were willing to become.

Rowan's fingers closed around the keys.

Slowly.

Behind the fence line, Mojave's posture shifted almost imperceptibly. His weight shifted forward, just a fraction, like a creature bracing for something inevitable.

Rowan didn't look at him again.

They slid the key into the ignition.

For a heartbeat, nothing happened.

The entire world seemed to hold still.

Then..

The engine turned over.

The sound was ugly. Ordinary. Loud in a way that felt obscene after so much quiet.

Behind them, Mojave's ears lowered.

Not in rage. Not in grief.

In recognition.

This wasn't hesitation.

This was departure.

Rowan put the car in gear.

The vehicle began to move, slowly at first, tires crunching against gravel, the road pulling them forward whether they felt ready or not.

Mojave stayed where he was.

He Didn't run. He Didn't follow. He Didn't raise the cleaver.

He just watched.

Watched the car pull away.

Watched the person he had carved himself into decide to leave him.

Every expectation collapsed inward on itself. Every assumption that Rowan would break, that they would return, that they would choose certainty over terror, fell apart in silence.

A waste.

A sin.

Rowan was leaving.

Really leaving.

And Mojave, for the first time in a very long time, was being left behind.

The car picked up speed.

The desert stretched wide and empty ahead, no longer a maze, just distance.

In the rearview mirror, Rowan saw him.

A dark figure growing smaller.

A silhouette against the burning sky.

A certainty shrinking into myth.

Their vision blurred.

Tears came, not violently.

Just a slow spill, quiet and unstoppable.

Rowan didn't wipe them away.

They kept driving.

I will carry you with me,

whether I want to or not.

You are carved into my nervous system,

into my reflexes,

into the part of me that flinches and the part that hungers.

You will live in the way I doubt kindness,

in the way I mistrust safety,

in the way I mistake control for love.

And all grief that feasts on my flesh,

Will taste only you.

Because my blood will forever whisper your name.

And your name only.

But I will not die here.

The sun rose fully now, light spilling through the windshield, casting the moving shadow of the car long and thin across the road, proof of motion, proof of direction, proof of continuation.

Mojave watched the car disappear until it was no longer a shape, just heat and dust rearranging themselves.

The sound of the engine thinned, stretched, then broke apart into nothing. The desert closed behind it like it always did, indifferent, efficient. No echo. No memorial. Just absence settling where something had been.

His grip tightened anyway, metal biting into his palm. He had expected many things. Rage. Defiance. Collapse. The inevitable turn back. Humans always circled back to their cages eventually. That was the rule. That was the pattern.

Rowan broke the pattern.

That irritated him more than betrayal ever could.

The desert returned to stillness. The world corrected itself. Mojave stood alone in the place where certainty usually lived and found, for the first time, a shape that did not resolve cleanly.

Not grief.

Not loss.

Just a quiet, corrosive truth he did not like the taste of Something choosing to leave him.

The gate stood closed.

The road stayed empty.

And for the first time in a very long while, Mojave was the only thing left watching.

Watching something he genuinely hoped would return

Eventually,

Mojave vanished from the mirror.

The house vanished.

The desert swallowed everything behind them.

Rowan drove on.

Not healed.

Not redeemed.

Not whole.

Just alive.

And the most devastating truth settled in quietly, without gentleness, without mercy.

They would *never* be the same again.

Whatever waited ahead would not be innocence,

and whatever was left behind would never truly let go.

The road stretched forward, empty and indifferent,

and Rowan followed it,

carrying the shape of a monster inside their mind,

and knowing quietly, clinically, without excuse,

that they had chosen the cage anyway ; 

This is where we cry and stare at the wall for 45 minutes! Hope you all are feeling emotionally stable! Please hydrate and spiral responsibly!!

I'm sorry I took longer than usual. I was working really hard on this chapter specifically, but hey! You guys got an extra long devastating chapter! Good for you.

Thank you SO much for coming on this journey with me! I did NOT expect so many people to enjoy this fic, let alone attract so much attention, but it did and I am SO grateful for you guys and all the fanart I received. You guys legitimately made my intro into 2026 amazing. And I often ALWAYS dread the New Years. But you guys made it worthwhile. I sincerely enjoyed writing these chapters for you guys. I had fun diving into Mojave's personality which I'm so relieved that you guys think I did accurately on. I wanted to do StarGazers Studios justice with portraying Mojave as perfectly as possible. And I hope the creator one day thinks I did so very well too.

But of course, all the credit and glory goes to the maker of Mojave. So thank you to them for making such a wonderfully complex made character for us to gander upon. They're the true artist. I was simply a victim of their awesome creativity. And Thank you to Sora, my BEST friend. I couldn't have wrote such unique scenes without his help. He helped the stories development by thoroughly exploring the games layout and hidden features for me to write about. And.. he did help me make the ending as miserable and devastating as possible♡

This is genuinely the first time people have noticed my writing and liked it. Very rarely do I often share it, so I'm glad to have discovered Cat Named Mojave, otherwise no one would have found it.

Is this the end forever? Well, that depends on you guys. I will be uploading a chapter tomorrow, but NOT FOR THE STORY. This isn't a new NEW chapter. Its like.. a small update/discussion? A poll even, discussing if whether you guys do want a follow up series of Rowan returning back to the desert. Amongst other things. I would do it on social media, but considering not everyone shares the same socials, i'll just do it here. The main details will be in the nexter chapter. I'm too tired to go into it right now because I've been up for a while editing, writing, and proof reading. So i'll upload the discussion Chapter tomorrow in the next 24 hours. I'll call it "NOT A NEW CHAPTER" so some of you don't get your hopes raised up. Not yet at least. And NO. NO MALEPREG CONTENT OR KITTENS. I WILL NOT RELEASE A DETAILED CHAPTER OF ROWAN GIVING BIRTH SO STOP ASKING 🙄

I also made a breakup playlist for Rowan LMAO or songs they'd like. If anyone was interested in listening. My interpretation of Rowan low key gives American Hispanic vibes, so I put a bit of sad Mexican music in there for them to cry to in their car while downing Whiskey.

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3dGIFkHZx9aL1KqD2B3Fa0?si=BxtmxnlARvKE9GdjDOqmJg&pi=-cG0poBBR9GdA>

Anyway, I hope you guys enjoyed the final chapter! (I think everyone hates me now actually—)

But regardless I hope it was impactful as it was bone crushing.. please don't send me death threats..

I love you all! Good morning and Goodnight💖

Chapter 25: !!NOT A NEW CHAPTER!!

Chapter Summary

Discussion???

Like I said last chapter, I was gonna include a small discussion or mini poll to decide what you guys want me to do with this story.

A few people have had different ideas they suggested I should take.

And I have a few ideas too.

I don't want to really abandon the story yet, cause I know this Fandom doesn't have enough fan content which is depressing..

So, the first idea is Option A):

An alternative ending where Rowan gets out of the car and returns back to Mojave.

This would be like.. one chapter. And I wouldn't include more chapters of the aftermath of them living together. However, Option B would.

And then option B):

We can continue where the last chapter left off. Rowan has returned to their mundane domestic life, trying to live normally but is still haunted by the past of the desert. They struggle to live peacefully, experiencing PTSD from familiar animals and situations, leading to Rowan eventually snapping. And unable to bare it anymore, they return BACK to the desert and reunites with Mojave.

For this option, I have a few ideas. Maybe even a mini series of Rowan and Mojave learning to live together, along with a few new faces. (And not in the '*inserting my ocs*' type shi way, cause I genuinely don't have any anthromorphic furry characters.) But they would be made to fit the games tone. And the main focus will always be on Rowan and Mojave. Cause I do STILL want Rowan to explore their new.. identity they've embraced while living with Mojave. This story would probably have like.. a Rango type vibe. You feel me? If anyone's watched that movie, you know what I mean. I'd probably put familiar faces like that. Including new conflict. Like something including Anora and other minor off screen characters mentioned in the game. I do feel kinda weird doing this cause I would be going off script and taking complete control of the direction of the story.

However it would be the longest. And I think I'd most likely make a different work for that.

And then option C):

I don't write anything at all until StarGazers Studios make a new Mojave game. Cause the creator has mentioned they'd definitely make more Mojave games. And who knows? It might be the MC returning. I am excited to see what StarGazers Studios whip up next, but I know it will most likely be a very long time till then

If you guys REALLY wanted, I could do both A and B. Add the alternative ending to this fic, then make an entirely new fic for option B.

And of course, if anyone has any ideas, feel free to suggest! I still want your guys opinion and what you think I should do next.

Chapter 26: Alternative Ending: Conditioning Successful

Chapter Summary

Rowan goes back (Option A)

Chapter Notes

I'm sorrrry yall waited this long for the alternative ending. I got pretty busy with medical stuff, family drama, living and financial issues. But the good news? I turned 21 this month like 3 days ago and and you best know I celebrated 🍷 which is also why the chapter took a while.

And for my birthday, I received a MOJAVE cake lmao. It was... gorgeous. I loved it. There's a video attached on the bottom. I don't think some of you can access it, so I also uploaded it on my personal Instagram: [_Miss_Goreistic](#)

I'll try to tag the link of the Instagram video at the bottom authors notes.

And YouTube blocks it for some reason💔

Anyway, I hope you guys enjoy this alternative ending. I'm sorry if its a bit bland. I wrote some of this while drinking 🍷 but you guys will definitely get option B soon when I'm not busy. And it will be a new work. Still working on a name for it

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Rowan opened their eyes.

The road ahead shimmered in the heat.

The road behind held a certainty that would never ask them who they wanted to be, only what they were willing to become.

Rowan's fingers closed around the keys.

Slowly.

Behind the fence line, Mojave's posture shifted almost imperceptibly. His weight shifted forward just a fraction, like a creature bracing for something inevitable.

Rowan didn't look at him again.

They slid the key into the ignition.

For a heartbeat, nothing happened.

The entire world seemed to hold still.

Then..

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The sound was ugly. Ordinary. Loud in a way that felt obscene after so much quiet.

Behind them, Mojave's ears lowered.

Not in rage. Not in grief.

In recognition.

This wasn't hesitation.

This was departure.

Rowan put the car in gear.

The vehicle began to move, slowly at first, tires crunching against gravel, the road pulling them forward whether they felt ready or not.

Mojave stayed where he was.

He Didn't run. He Didn't follow. He Didn't raise the cleaver.

He just watched.

Watched the car pull away.

Watched the person he had carved himself into decide to leave him.

Every expectation collapsed inward on itself. Every assumption that Rowan would break, that they would return, that they would choose certainty over terror, fell apart in silence.

A waste.

A sin.

Rowan was leaving.

Really leaving.

And Mojave, for the first time in a very long time, was being left behind.

He stood at the gate long enough for the dust to settle. Long enough for the engine's growl to thin into the desert's vast, indifferent hush. The sunrise laid that warm holy color over everything sand and scrub and rock, like the universe was mocking him with beauty, as if the world wanted to pretend to look innocent. It wasn't.. honest.

Mojave didn't move until the car became nothing but shimmer.

Then he turned.

No chase. No last act. No tantrum of metal and teeth. Just a slow pivot, like the world had made its decision and he refused to grant it the dignity of a reaction.

He walked back through the gate, shut it behind him, and followed the path home the way a predator returns to its den after a hunt that went wrong, not wounded, not crying, just... unable to catch the prey today. It had ran away.

The house waited, same as it always had.

The mounted heads. The stillness. The stale air that smelled faintly of dried blood and dust and old beer. A museum with no visitors. A god with no congregation.

He went straight to the kitchen.

Cracked a beer with his teeth and leaned over the table, forearms braced like he was trying to pin the entire house down with his weight. The bottle sweated in his hand. He didn't drink right away. He stared at the wood grain, the tiny nicks and scratches, order carved into a surface to pretend chaos was manageable.

A breath left him through his nose.

Almost a scoff.

Almost a laugh.

Waste.

Sin.

Rowan was the flaw.

Rowan was always the flaw.

Not because they were weak.

Because they were inconsistent.

They could take horror, could endure pain that would turn most creatures into screaming pulp and still, *still*, they clung to that human disease.. *maybe*.

Maybe I can go back.

Maybe I can be good.

Maybe I can do all of this and not become what it made me.

Mojave's jaw tightened.

That maybe had nearly gotten him killed.

That maybe had bled all over his floor.

That maybe had walked out the gate like it could pretend it wasn't branded.

He finally drank, the bitter harshness stung him, letting the cold swallow scrape down his throat like punishment.

He didn't do regret. Regret was for creatures who believed the past could have been different if they'd been nicer. Softer. Good.

And yet..

There was a splinter under his ribs anyway. Something he refused to name. A sensation that wasn't grief, wasn't guilt... just a wrongness that kept catching on his breath.

He took another drink.

The house shifted.

His ears twitched.

A sound that didn't belong.

Not the wind. Not the fridge cycling.

A click.

A door.

And a small creak.

Mojave's grip tightened around the bottle. He didn't turn. Didn't need to. His voice came out rough with annoyance, like the world had interrupted him mid-thought.

"..I thought I *told* you," he said, slow and venom-calm, "I never want to see you again—"

Something heavy whistled through the air.

Mojave moved on instinct, fast and predatory, shoulder twisting as the object slammed into the wall behind him with a wet metallic crack that made the whole house flinch.

Plastic shattered.

Acid hissed.

The chemical smell bursted into the air.

The car battery lay in pieces on the floor like a smashed altar.

Mojave turned.

Rowan stood in the doorway.

...heaving.

Blood dried dark under their collar. Bandages peeking from under their jacket, wrapped sloppy and angry, like they'd stitched themselves together out of spite. Their eyes were hollowed out, like the desert had scooped them clean and left only bone behind.

Their hands were empty now.

Because they'd thrown the last thing that was supposed to mean something.

Mojave stared at Rowan.

Then at the battery.

Then back at Rowan.

For a moment, his face did something rare.

Not softness.

Shock.

"...What," he said, his voice flat with disbelief. "What the *fuck* did you just do?"

Rowan swallowed, chest rising and falling too fast, like their body was still driving, still bracing for impact.

They didn't answer right away.

They looked at the ruined battery like it was a corpse.

Like it was proof.

Then Rowan stepped forward.

Crunch.

Plastic bit under their boot. A shard snapped.

They walked over it like it was nothing.

“Do you know what’s funny?” Rowan’s voice came out raw. Not loud. Not angry. Just... tired. “I thought if I held onto it hard enough, it would keep me sane.”

Mojave’s ears angled forward a bit, attention sharpening whether he wanted it to or not.

Rowan laughed once, sharp and ruined. “That thing.” Their chin jerked at the broken battery like as if it wasn’t what they used to worship in prayer, “I told myself it was the reason. I told myself I did all of this for that.”

They took another step closer.

Mojave didn’t move.

Rowan’s eyes flicked up to his. “It was easier.”

Mojave’s lip twitched, “Easier than what.”

Rowan’s jaw clenched hard enough their throat worked around the words. “Easier than admitting I—”

Their voice snagged.

“—needed you.”

The confession didn’t bloom. It didn’t soften anything. It just hung there like smoke.

Mojave’s stare narrowed to a razor line. “You came back to say that?”

Rowan’s laugh cracked into something almost hysterical. “No.” A sharp inhale. “I came back because you’re sitting here acting like you got abandoned by some poor innocent thing that wandered into your den and forgot to worship you.”

Mojave’s eyes narrowed.

Rowan’s voice rose, still not yelling but vibrating with adrenaline. “You want to talk about unreliable?” They stepped closer, into the flickering atmosphere of the kitchen light, close enough Mojave could smell iron and antiseptic on them, could see how pale they were under exhaustion and pain and whatever decision they’d made in that car.

“I destroyed my life for you,” Rowan said, each word landing like a nail. “I destroyed the one thing that could bring me home.. and you know what? It didn’t even feel like I lost anything when it hit the wall. That’s the problem.” Their breath shook. “I *killed* for you.”

Mojave’s jaw ticked.

Rowan’s eyes burned. “And I could let you eat me,” they went on, voice splitting with disgust, “pick me apart like a fucking cannibal.. because you would.. and I’d still be selfish for wanting to keep my bones, wouldn’t I?”

Mojave went still.

That one hit somewhere it wasn't supposed to.

Rowan's hands shook, not out of fear. But Fury. An epiphany. That brittle kind of calm that only shows up when something inside you has snapped clean. When understanding and insanity meet.

"You want devotion," Rowan hissed. "But not the human kind. Not the messy kind. You want the kind that doesn't ask questions. The kind that doesn't hesitate. The kind that doesn't have a self."

Mojave's voice dropped. "Watch it."

Rowan scoffed and stepped even closer, right into the radius where Mojave could hurt them with one small movement.

"No," Rowan said.

Mojave's eyes flashed.

Rowan pointed at him accusingly, like they were putting him on trial. "You talk about cages like you're above them, but you build them out of people."

Mojave's ears angled back. "You don't know what you're saying."

"I do," Rowan snapped. "You don't want an equal. You want a mirror that worships you back."

Mojave's claws flexed once warningly.

Rowan didn't flinch.

And that was the new thing.

Rowan's voice went lower, almost mocking now, like cruelty was the only way they could say the truth without falling apart. "You won't kill me."

Mojave's gaze sharpened. "Try me."

Rowan's mouth twisted. "You won't."

They leaned forward, reckless, suicidal. Their eyes were bright with something half-broken and half-feral. "Because you need me," Rowan whispered, nasty with satisfaction. "Just like I need you."

Mojave's breath caught. Stilling for a moment... interrupted. His lip curled, but it wasn't a smile. It was defensive. Insulted.

"That's not—"

“Yeah,” Rowan cut in, relentless, “it is.” Their voice shook, but they didn’t retreat. “You can pretend you’re above it. You can pretend you’re a god. You can pretend you’re the only honest thing in the world—”

They swallowed, eyes blazing.

“—but you’re just lonely with better vocabulary.”

Mojave’s shoulders tensed.

His voice came out warning-flat. “Rowan.”

Rowan didn’t stop.

“I think you’re hurt,” Rowan said, voice cracking, “and you’re too much of a narcissistic bastard to admit it, so you call it philosophy and dress it up like you’re above everyone else —”

Mojave’s hand shot out and fisted their jacket. Fast.

Rowan jerked with it

and still didn’t pull away.

Mojave leaned in, voice low, dangerous. “Say it again.”

Rowan’s eyes widened slightly, still neither fear or shock. Just a sick defiant thrill at being proved right.

They lifted their chin. “If you weren’t lonely, you wouldn’t be so angry I tried to leave.”

Mojave’s grip tightened.

The kitchen went very still.

Rowan’s breath hitched, but they held his gaze like a dare. Like, *go on. Prove I’m wrong. Prove you don’t care. Make it simple again.*

Mojave’s eyes scanned Rowan’s face like he was searching for the seam where the lie would split.

Rowan’s voice softened, not kindly. Just tired. “You want to act like I’m the unreliable one. Like I’m the coward.”

A bitter breath.

“But you’re the one who can’t stand being seen.”

Then quietly,

“You’re angry I tried to hurt you,” Rowan said. “That’s the part you can’t stand. Because if I’m just prey, then I don’t get to matter. And if I matter... then what does that make *you*?”

Mojave’s breathing changed. Subtle.

His grip tightened on nothing.

Rowan’s voice became a whisper, almost tender in its cruelty.

“I think you were watching my car like a kicked dog watches a door.”

Mojave’s eyes flashed.

Rowan smiled again, small and devastating.

“I think you thought I’d come back without you having to admit you wanted me to.”

Silence, very loud silence..

Rowan stepped even closer into it the silence, till they could hear only their heartbeats, syncing in beat, in violence.

“You can call me unreliable,” Rowan whispered, “but you’re the one who stayed up all night to keep me alive.”

Mojave’s jaw clenched.

“That was—”

“Control?” Rowan supplied, head tilting. “Go ahead. Say it. Say it was just control.”

Mojave stared like the truth was a thing in his mouth he refused to spit out.

Rowan’s eyes flicked down at the broken battery. “So I broke it,” they said. “Because I’m done pretending this was ever about a fucking car.”

Mojave’s gaze dropped to the wrecked shattered plastic leaking acid, now dead weight and garbage.

Then back to Rowan.

His voice went quiet. Too quiet.

“... You only came back just to break it,” he murmured. “Because you had nowhere else to go.”

Rowan swallowed.

Their eyes didn’t drop.

“No,” Rowan said hoarsely. “I came back because *I do*.”

Mojave stared at them a long moment.

His gaze dragged over Rowan's face slowly possessively, yet furiously.

Rowan's voice dropped into something almost intimate yet ruined.

"If you want me," they whispered, "if you want your '*how high*'.. you're going to have to admit you're capable of wanting, too."

Mojave didn't deny it.

He didn't confirm it.

He just held Rowan there with his grip and his silence, like silence was the only language left that didn't feel like surrender.

Rowan's breath hitched again, and they smiled viciously, broken but vicious. because even without words, they'd gotten what they came back for.

A reaction.

a fracture in the god.

And Mojave, still holding them, looked like a man deciding whether to punish them for seeing it...

or keep them for it.

His fist was still twisted in Rowan's jacket like it was the only handle the universe had given him, like if he loosened his grip the entire night, every hour, every breath he forced out of them, would evaporate into "waste" all over again.

Rowan's pulse hammered against his throat. Offensively alive. Their eyes stayed on his, unblinking. Not pleading. Not apologizing. That was what made it dangerous. That was what made it feel... personal.

Mojave's mouth curled, sharp and bitter. "So what," he muttered. "You're going to stand there and pretend you've suddenly grown a spine?"

Rowan's lips twitched into something that wasn't a smile, not really. More like a cut.

"No," Rowan said, voice low. "I'm going to stand here and tell you you can't file me down into some neat little myth like you did with your tail."

Mojave's eyes narrowed.

Rowan leaned a fraction closer, close enough that Mojave could smell the antiseptic on their skin and the dried blood in their hair, close enough to feel the heat of their breath like an accusation.

“You did that,” Rowan went on, quietly vicious. “You ate your own innocence and you acted like that made you powerful. Like you could chew it up, swallow it, and be done. Like it was over.”

Mojave’s grip tightened. The fabric creaked.

Rowan didn’t flinch.

They just tilted their head, studying him like they were finally brave enough to look at the god and name the seams where he’d been stitched together.

“I’m not your tail,” Rowan said.

Mojave’s ears flicked back, irritation sharpening. “No?”

Rowan’s gaze dropped briefly to the cleaver, to the battery acid sizzling on the floor, to the ruin of the one excuse they’d used like a prayer. Then back up to Mojave, steady as a knife.

“No,” Rowan repeated. “I’m not something you can devour and spit out and forget. I’m not a story you tell yourself to make your hunger sound like philosophy.”

Mojave’s lip curled again, A near-snarl.

Rowan pushed their head forward anyway, until the space between them was so thin it felt like pressure rather than distance.

“You’ll remember,” Rowan whispered. “You’ll remember the way you sank your teeth into me.. into my life, my head, my fear.. because I’m not something that comes off clean.”

Mojave’s throat bobbed once. His eyes stayed hard. But something in the stillness betrayed him, an almost microscopic pause, like his brain had to re-catalog what Rowan was doing right now.

Choosing him.

Not out of terror. Not out of conditioning.

Out of something that felt like a dare to the universe.

Rowan’s voice softened into something worse, something weirdly devotional, and somehow romantic yet threatening at the same time.

“I’m behind you now,” Rowan said. “An extended part of you. A shadow that learned your shape so well it can’t unlearn it. You can’t wash me off. You can’t burn me out. You can’t pretend you didn’t carve yourself into me and call it ‘truth.’”

Mojave’s eyes narrowed further, but the anger had a fracture in it now, something like being seen too clearly.

Rowan’s mouth twitched.

“And you hate that,” Rowan murmured. “Because it means you don’t get to be alone on purpose anymore.”

Mojave’s hand jerked, one sharp tug, not enough to hurt, just enough to remind Rowan who had the strength here.

His voice went low, razor-flat. “Careful.”

Rowan’s eyes gleamed.

“I am,” Rowan said.

Mojave leaned in, teeth flashing, no smile, all threat. “I’ll still *eat* you anyway.”

The words hit the air like a blade thrown into a wall.

Rowan’s expression didn’t break.

It brightened.

Not with happiness. With that god sick, fearless satisfaction of someone who has finally stopped bargaining with themselves.

Rowan leaned closer so close their breath ghosted over Mojave’s mouth, so close it’d be easy for the other to kill each other, close enough to confuse God into thinking they’re one.

“Then do it,” Rowan whispered.

Mojave’s eyes flicked fast, involuntarily to Rowan’s throat.

Rowan watched him do it.

Watched the instinct.

And didn’t pull away.

“You’ll taste only yourself,” Rowan said, voice silk-thin and cruel. “Because you’re already in me. That’s what you wanted, right? To be the only honest thing left.”

Mojave went very still.

Not because he believed them.

Because no one.. *no one*..spoke to him like that.

Not prey. Not enemies. Atticus had tried to convince Mojave they were equals. Partners. But he had waited for the right moment to slip the blade under his ribs when he wasn’t looking.

Rowan wasn’t trying to fix him.

Rowan wasn’t trying to escape him, either.

Rowan was standing there offering him the one thing he'd built his whole world around pretending he didn't need:

choice given freely.

Mojave's grip on Rowan's jacket loosened a fraction.

Not mercy.

Not surrender.

A recalibration.

Rowan's eyes stayed locked to his like a hook. "You always talked like the world was a cage," Rowan murmured. "And you always acted like you were the only one brave enough to live outside it."

They let out a soft, ruined breath. "So here I am."

Mojave's nostrils flared.

His jaw clenched hard enough his cheek twitched.

For a moment, he looked... offended. Like the universe had handed him something sacred and he didn't know whether to bite it or worship it.

Rowan smiled, a small toxic, triumphant smile. "You don't get to call me unreliable now," Rowan whispered. "Not after this."

Mojave's voice came out low, tight. "You're insane."

Rowan's smile widened a hair. "Yeah," they said softly. "And you taught *me*."

...

The kitchen air felt too thin to breathe.

Mojave's eyes dragged over Rowan's face, almost like he was memorizing them out of spite. Then he leaned in, close enough to make Rowan's heartbeat stutter, close enough to make it feel like he could close his teeth around the entire moment and snap.

His voice was quiet, too quiet.

"You think being chosen makes you powerful," Mojave murmured.

Rowan's gaze didn't drop. "No," they said. "I think choosing does."

Mojave's ears lowered slightly.

Not in grief.

Not in softness.

In recognition.

Because it wasn't worship. It wasn't compliance.

It was Rowan standing in his kitchen, bleeding and feral, and telling him, *I'm not your prey anymore.*

And Mojave, who had spent his whole existence insisting that nothing mattered but teeth and truth, found himself staring at a human who had finally learned his language...

...and decided to speak it back.

Rowan's voice dropped into something almost gentle, which somehow made it worse.

"Go on," Rowan murmured. "Try to get rid of me."

Mojave stared.

Rowan smiled.

Because they both knew the same ugly truth,

Mojave could break bones.

He could break bodies.

But this?

this was the first thing that had ever made him hesitate without fear.

And Rowan, leaning into the danger like it was a lover, whispered the most poisonous kind of promise,

"You don't get to forget me."

Mojave didn't move for a moment.

He just held Rowan there with his eyes, like he was deciding what to do with a thing that had finally stopped trying to be "good," and started trying to be true.

Rowan's jacket was still bunched in his fist, but the grip wasn't shaking with anger anymore. It was steadier now. Intentional. Ownership that had found something it didn't want to misplace.

The broken battery hissed quietly on the floor behind them, acid spitting like an animal too stupid to understand it had already died.

Rowan didn't look at it.

Neither did Mojave.

Because it didn't matter.

Not anymore.

Mojave's breath slid out slow through his nose. His ears lowered, like an animal shifting from fight to decision.

Rowan's throat bobbed. They should have been terrified.

They weren't.

They were exhausted past terror. Hollowed out past morality. And in that hollow, Mojave fit perfectly, like he had been designed for the vacancy.

Mojave's voice finally came, low and sharp, but not theatrical.

"Say it again."

Rowan blinked once. "Say what."

Mojave's eyes narrowed. His grip tightened a fraction, not painful, just a reminder of consequence.

"That you *chose* me."

Rowan inhaled raggedly, honest. Their eyes flicked over Mojave's face like they were searching for the trap in it. Like they were waiting for him to laugh, to punish, to turn it into a game.

But Mojave didn't smile.

He waited.

Rowan's mouth opened, hesitating for a moment, human reflex, the old habit of rehearsing lies until they sounded safe.

Then they exhaled and let the lie die in their throat.

"I chose you," Rowan said, voice rough. "I'm *choosing* you."

The kitchen went still.

It wasn't a performance. It wasn't fear dressed up as devotion. Not even worshiply in the lack of self dignity.

Just a predator processing the sound of a door locking from the inside.

Mojave stared at Rowan for a long moment, too long. Like he was memorizing the exact angle of their face in case the universe tried to rewrite it later.

Then his mouth twitched, not into a smile, but into something dangerously close to satisfaction.

“...That’s comforting,” he murmured.

Rowan’s breath hitched, not because it was sweet, but because it was Mojave. Because if Mojave was offering comfort, it came with teeth still attached.

His free hand lifted slowly, and touched Rowan’s jaw, thumb dragging along the line of it like he was checking for a fracture.

Rowan didn’t pull away.

That alone felt like an earthquake.

Mojave’s eyes narrowed, studying them like an artifact. “You’re starting to understand me now,” he said quietly.

Rowan’s lips parted.

Mojave leaned closer, just enough for Rowan to feel it, just enough to make the air between them feel owned.

“And that’s *dangerous*. ”

Rowan let out a breath that almost sounded like a laugh. “Yeah..?”

Mojave’s gaze sharpened. “Because you don’t get to walk away from me again.”

There it was.

Not romance.

Not reassurance.

A claim, said softly enough to sound like tenderness if you didn’t know what it meant.

Rowan swallowed. Their hands trembled, not from fear this time, but from the shock of how easy it would be to step into it. How their body already knew the rhythm of Mojave’s world. How “escape” had started to feel like a foreign language.

Mojave watched the tremor and clicked his tongue, annoyed, at Rowan, at the world, at the concept of hesitation.

He finally released Rowan’s jacket.

Not because he stopped wanting to hold them.

Because he didn’t need to keep Rowan at his side by a leash anymore. Didn’t need to threaten them. Didn’t need to hold a knife at their throat.

Rowan wasn't running.

Instead, Mojave reached past them, plucked a clean cloth from the counter, and shoved it into Rowan's hands.

Rowan blinked at it.

Mojave's eyes flicked to the blood on Rowan's collar, the crusted edge of bandage near their hairline.

"Wipe," Mojave ordered.

Rowan stared, then slowly, obeyed. The cloth dragged across their mouth. Across their chin. Like erasing a line they'd crossed already and couldn't uncross.

Mojave's gaze didn't soften, but something in it eased, like watching Rowan comply wasn't about control anymore.

It was about proof.

Proof that Rowan could live inside his reality without constantly trying to apologize for it.

Rowan lowered the cloth, breathing uneven.

Mojave stepped closer again, tilting Rowan's head to inspect the wrap on their skull with the kind of precision that looked like cruelty until you understood it was care shaped into something he could tolerate.

His fingers were firm. Efficient. Possessive.

Rowan's eyelids fluttered.

Mojave noticed.

He leaned in, voice lower, almost comforting. "You're not going back."

Rowan's throat tightened. "I didn't say—"

Mojave's eyes snapped up, slicing the excuse clean in half. "You don't have to say it," he murmured. "Your body already did."

Rowan went quiet.

Mojave's mouth twitched again, and this time it almost resembled approval.

"Good," he said.

Rowan's fingers tightened around the cloth until their knuckles went pale. Then, like something in them finally unclenched, the last neat little human ribbon snapping under pressure, they let their shoulders drop.

A small collapse.

A surrender.

Not to pain.

Not to fear.

To truth.

Rowan exhaled, voice barely there. “So what now?”

Mojave’s eyes tracked them like a hunter watching prey step willingly into the clearing. His ears tilted forward, attentive in a way that felt almost... personal.

“What now,” he repeated, tasting it.

Then he glanced down at the broken battery on the floor, the dead excuse, the myth finally shattered.

He looked back at Rowan.

And the answer on his face was ruthless, satisfied, and strangely intimate all at once, as if he’d been waiting for this moment longer than he’d ever admit.

Mojave’s voice came quiet.

“We stop pretending.”

Rowan swallowed. The house felt different. Same trophies, same static-red TV glow, same dried blood in the seams of everything.

But now the silence wasn’t abandonment.

It was alignment.

Rowan’s eyes flicked up to Mojave, searching for the edge of his next demand.

Mojave gave it without blinking.

“You stay,” he said. “You learn. You don’t run. And you don’t look for cages to crawl back into when things get hard.”

Rowan’s mouth twitched, raw humor slipping through. “And if I do?”

Mojave’s gaze sharpened like a blade coming out of its sheath.

“Then I remind you,” he said simply.

Rowan didn’t ask how.

They already knew.

That was the sickest part. That was the part that felt like bonding, in their ruined, unspeakable language. Understanding the punishment and choosing it anyway, because it came with a hand on your jaw after. Because it came with someone staying awake beside you for eight hours and calling it “supervision” so they didn’t have to call it anything human.

Rowan stared at him a long moment.

Then they nodded, subtle, but understood.

Mojave watched the nod like it was a confession. His voice dropped, the closest thing to affection he could stand to own,

“That’s... better.”

Rowan’s breath shook.

They wiped their mouth again, tossed the cloth aside, and looked past Mojave, past the kitchen, past the hallway of evidence, past the life they’d just burned down with their own hands.

Then they looked back at him.

Really looked.

And for the first time, their expression didn’t ask to be saved.

It asked what came next.

Rowan’s voice came quiet, almost flat with exhaustion, yet steady in a way it had never been before.

“Okay,” they said.

...

Then, simple.

Small.

Like striking a match in a room full of gasoline.

“When’s the next hunt?”

 MOJAVE CAKE

Chapter End Notes

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DT4tw7eFG8x/?igsh=bmRpaTRpOXB1bHh6>

Chapter 27: New Sequel out now!!!

The first chapter of the newest sequel taking place after Rowan leaves the desert is out now! Thank you all for your patience and support. I wouldn't have come this far into the story without you guys. This story is officially complete and we will now be entering the sequel of Rowan trying to live on without Mojave, and failing.

The sequel was made into a new work cause I don't wish to continue on this fic any longer. This fic will remain as the games lore. The next sequel will be called: "Body Named Rowan."

Yes I played on the words of "Cat Named Mojave" to keep the games atmosphere.

No one has to read it. Some of you can leave it where we left off until we get a new Mojave game. This new sequel is just for the starved fans looking for more fan content to get by. Something to take the edge off, if you will...👉🍷

Click my profile to find the new work now! The fic will go into deeper details regarding the story.

Thank you for encouraging my writing.

Love you guys❤️

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!